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VOL. 6, NO. 5

MANHUNT

AUGUST, 1958

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Bead crushed his wife's skull with the flat iron, and that would have been that, except for the sudden appearance of all those. . . .

DEAD CATS

BY HENRY MARKSBURY

THE CAT had gotten away. This was the only flaw in the murder. *Flaw, flaw, flaw,* the word went through Mr. Bead's mind; it was a word that sounded annoyingly like the cat's name: Flo.

Bead had hated his wife for many years and had lived with her in spite of the hate, because living with her was a habit, like smoking. He had never been able to give up smoking. But he *had* been able to give up his wife. A week ago, he had murdered her.

Now, at six in the morning, he stood smoking a cigarette and leaning on a coal shovel outside the door of the apartment building on West 55th Street, where he lived and worked as Superintendent.

Flaw. Flo was a beautiful shaggy brown-haired cat which Bead's wife had believed to be a Persian. Bead liked cats; at least fifty cats lived in or near the five-story apartment building, and he liked them all. But he did not like Flo. Rather, he *could* not like Flo. Because Flo hated *him*.

Bead tapped cigarette ashes into the air; thinking of Flo made him so nervous that he tap-tapped the cigarette long after all the dead ashes had fallen. Flo had hated him because he hated his wife, whom Flo loved.

Through the years the Beads had had many cats, who were merely cats—pets in the apartment, plain, ordinary cats. But Flo was different. The Beads knew this and Flo knew it. She was superior, extra-ordinary.

"You never pay any attention to Flo," Bead's wife had often said. "And Flo is so beautiful. So vain. It hurts her that you ignore her."

"Flo doesn't like me," Bead said.

"That's crazy."

"It isn't crazy. It's true."

"Why would Flo hate you? And how? Cats can't hate."

"I don't know," Bead said. This was half a lie. He knew why Flo hated him. But he did not know how Flo, among all cats and probably among all the animals in the world, had the ability to hate and to love. Also, Bead did not know how *he* knew that Flo hated him. He just knew. And Flo knew he knew. And, strangely, he enjoyed their shared knowledge; it was their secret that they kept from the old woman. Certainly *she* knew that Bead despised her, but she didn't know that he and the cat shared knowledge of his emotion. Also, Bead did not know how he was able to assure himself that he was the only human with whom the cat could communicate. He just knew. He knew that he was the only link the cat had, or desired to have, with humans.

They were a family for ten years, the woman and the man and the cat who loved the woman and hated the man because the man hated the woman. Logically, the man ought to have destroyed the cat. He meant to, but he never did. He couldn't. The cat shared with him a secret. It was so long, so many years, since Bead had had the pleasure of sharing a secret. The cat was too interesting to destroy.

Then, one Sunday morning in summer, when the air was hot and their nerves were on edge, Bead and his wife had an argument about who would go out to buy a bottle of milk and a newspaper. After ten minutes of hoarse-throated screaming back and forth, *Now* was the word that came to Bead's mind. He left the living-room, where his wife was standing. He walked into the kitchen, where she had been ironing. He picked up the iron from the board. He

yanked the extension cord from its plug at the base of the iron and threw the cord on the floor. Carrying the iron, he returned to the livingroom. His wife stared at him.

"You wouldn't," she murmured.

He hit her in the side of the head with the iron. She fell to the floor. He ran to the bedroom and got a pillow and put it beneath her head to absorb the blood running from her wound; otherwise, the blood might have left a telltale stain on the rug.

As Bead stood up, after placing the pillow beneath her head, he saw Flo, who was sitting on the sofa, seeming to stare, intent, like a spectator. *Now,* Bead thought. Now to kill her, now to crush her hatred of him. But Flo seemed to know the thought as it entered his mind. Her fur bristled; she arched her back. He approached the sofa slowly, waiting for her to jump, trying to outthink her. Close, only a yard away, now to strike with the iron—

Springing, bouncing, Flo was past him before his aged legs could react to his brain's impulse, his brain's message: move-touch-hold-kill. Flo ran into the bedroom and leaped to the window sill and bounded out onto the cobblestones of the alley.

Bead carried his wife's body into the cellar, which was twenty feet down the hall and down a flight of stairs from their first floor-rear apartment. Into the cellar, where he locked the door behind him and rolled up his shirtsleeves and took a shovel in his hands and went to the coal bin and began to dig into the four feet-high pile of coal left over from last winter. He dug a furrow in the coal and then, working all night, dug a grave and placed his wife, with the blood-stained pillow beneath her head, six feet under the dirt and brownstone of Manhattan. He covered the grave with coal and went back to his apartment. He was tired. He could see the light of dawn at the windows. He slept soundly . . .

Now, a week later, Bead stood leaning against a coal shovel outside the doorway of the apartment building. He yawned. It was just after six a. m.

He might have been able to enjoy the peace, the silence, of life without his wife, if it weren't for the dead cats. Every morning since he had killed his wife there had been one or two dead cats on the sidewalk when he went out at six a. m. to turn off the night light. No one else had seen the cats: he was the first to see them in morning light, and he buried them deep beneath the rubble of the garbage cans.

The first morning there had been only one, and he had assumed the cat had been hit by a car and someone had thrown the carcass onto the sidewalk. The second morning there were two, lying broken on the sidewalk. He knew

that cats lived on the roof of the building; in the summer they liked to sleep on the warm tar of the rooftop. He assumed that the two cats had had a fight near the six-inch high parapet of the roof, had clawed and struggled and had fallen over.

The third day he found no carcass, but on the fourth day there were two: one on the sidewalk, and the other behind the row of garbage cans along the front of the building. Probably this one had fallen the day before. Probably, because he knew now that Flo had murdered at least one cat every day since he had murdered his wife. The fifth day, one; the sixth, two; the seventh—

The seventh day was today.

This morning Bead had arisen at two, had dressed and gone down to the cellar and picked up the widemouthed coal shovel. Then, he had come out onto the sidewalk and surveyed every inch of the concrete with a flashlight. No dead cats. He waited.

He might be wrong, but he knew —without knowing how he knew —that Flo was murdering cats as they slept on the roof; dragging them to the edge and pushing them over. He could see her padding over the roof, slowly, to sink her teeth into the throat of a sleeping cat and drag the threshing body to the parapet, there waiting until the threshing ceased and then working the carcass up the six inches of the parapet. She was half again as large as an alley cat; larger, stronger, she could easily labor their bodies to the edge— Bead drew three final nervous drags on his cigarette and threw it on the sidewalk. In his mind, his vision of the murdering Flo seemed too strange to be true, and yet it was too vivid to be imaginary. He had to find out.

Flo was the only flaw. She had seen the crime and she had known —had experienced—the hatred, the murder, that he had felt toward his wife. Except for this single flaw, the murder was perfect. No one would miss his wife. They had had no friends; they never went out. If anyone did ask about her, he would say she had gone out West. And if they asked again, later, he would say she was still there; if they asked again, he would say she had died there.

With a thump like a loud thump of his own heart, the carcass of a cat hit the sidewalk ten feet from where Bead stood. His face, his hand, felt suddenly cold in the hot early summer morning air. He turned and went into the building and started up the five flights to the roof. This was what he had been waiting for. If no carcass had fallen, he would have told himself to wait another day; would have told himself that he was imagining the impossible; would have told himself that the cat deaths, whatever their cause, had ended.

One flight, two flights. The shovel was wide, eighteen inches at its mouth. A blow from it would kill a man. Bead thought—could feel imaginarily along his arms—how Flo's back would break beneath the flat surface of the shovel blade.

Three flights. Without consciously thinking of it, he had formed a plan. He would wait in the doorway to the rooftop until Flo attacked her next victim. While she was wrestling the body to the edge, he would run to her swinging the shovel down on top of her and then scooping her over the parapet and—

That will be the end, he thought. It was a crazy plan. He had no way of knowing he would find her there, on the roof. And yet he knew. He saw her already, in his mind.

Four flights. One more to go. He could see grey light rectangling the open doorway a flight of steps above him. *The end.* His hands were gripping the shovel tightly, tightly; his hands were a part of the shovel, his mind was in the blade of the shovel and his eyes saw, without seeing, the shaggy yellow form of the superior cat, the murderer of nine ordinary cats—Flo, sharer of his secret for ten years and now the only creature in the world, except himself, that knew his secret had become reality.

The roof was empty. He stood in the shadows of the landing inside the doorway. No cats slept on the tar. Ten feet away was the parapet. Bead sighed. Luck was against him: no sleeping cats, no bait for the trap. Flo had probably gone away, satisfied with the one kill for this morning.

He turned to go. Just as the rectangle filled with roof and sky shifted past his turning shoulder, he saw motion within the rectangle. He turned back. Flo stood looking at him, now walking toward him, slowly, directly toward him.

His heart felt like a chunk of ice inside him. He took two steps forward and stood outside the doorway. Six, five, four feet separated him and the slowly padding, approaching Flo. She stopped, stood staring at him, slit-eyed silent. Her fur was torn; skin, grey-yellow with red scar cleats, showed like patchwork on her body.

He raised the shovel waist-high, then arc-ed it behind him, like an axe upswung over his houlder, and then brought the shovel swiftly down, snapping, lashing his arms forward, and seeing Flo step lightly aside with mincing movements of her paws as the shovel smacked onto the tar surface of the roof. He raised the shovel quickly, clumsily, and pulled it clumsily downward again, seeing the blade descend squarely upon the cat's body—blocking her instantaneously from his view—and then seeing her step to one side as the blade smacked tar, jarring and ineffective.

His pulse thump-thumped in his head; he could feel his pulse in his hands where he gripped the shovel. Stupidly he returned her stare. Wildly he wondered if she knew not only the present thought of his mind, but the next one he had yet to think. Or perhaps—and now the image of Flo before him shrank and enlarged as his heart pulsed-relaxed, pulsed-relaxed — perhaps Flo did his thinking *for* him.

"No, no," he murmured. "Can't . . . be." It couldn't be, because now he had a thought that would be her death, and surely she would not think—intend—her death through him.

Holding the shovel in his right hand, he swung the blade backward and then, gripping the handle tightly, he pivoted forward, striking low with the shovel, covering in one lurching motion the four feet between them. But she was gone, dancing beyond the tip of the blade. He shifted his feet and struck again, revolving; fanning the shovel in one direction and then another, as though it were a scythe. There she was, but he was fanning in the opposite direction; he halted his motion, struck again, struck—nothing. There! There! And yet she stood, slit-eyed silent, in another place.

Knowing what would happen—but hoping that he was wrong and that he would see her cut in two by the blade—he threw the shovel at her, as he would have thrown a spear. He saw her run lightly within the trajectory of the hurtling shovel and then he saw the shovel strike harmlessly beyond her on the roof.

Weaponless, suddenly panicked, he took his flashlight from his back pocket and hurled it at her and turned, hearing the flashlight scuff across the roof, and started to run toward the door. He stumbled, then fell screaming as pain drilled into his left Achilles' tendon. He rolled onto his back. The pain deepened. He drew his feet toward his buttocks and the pain traveled with his feet. He closed his hands on his left heel and caught at her furry body. He heard her low snarl of pain and his own pain diminished, as he sat up and tried to encircle her neck with his hands.

With a long bounding leap she vaulted the barrier of his arms and impaled the claws of her forepaws in his chest. Hearing himself gasp at this new pain, he closed his arms to hug her to his chest, to break her bones. But she threshed her body upward, in the instant that his arms closed, and she sank her teeth into the long artery of his neck below his right ear. This pain stunned him. He couldn't scream. He felt blood warm on his neck. *I am going to faint,* he thought; and then his realization that he was no longer fighting to kill her, but to save his life, terrified him, filling him with new energy.

He crossed his left hand toward

her spine and felt only the fur of her back as she crawled over his right shoulder, briefly out of his grasp. He caught her right hind-paw and felt her claws crease his palm as he tightened his grip and heard the bone of her right leg snap.

Her cry sounded, near and far-echoing; a pleasure to him. And then her face was suddenly before him, directly beneath the tip of his nose. He darted his right hand to her left leg, intending to lift her body into the air and throw her over the parapet. His hand closed on her leg and then he felt the claws of her forepaws strike his collar-bone. He did not mind the pain. Three seconds more and she would be falling to her death.

Then, she did a strange thing. He thought she had gone mad with pain.

She braced her forepaws stiffly against his collar-bone and then pushed herself backward, balanced —forepaws and the claws of her forepaws extended—in his hands rigid and unyielding as a statue.

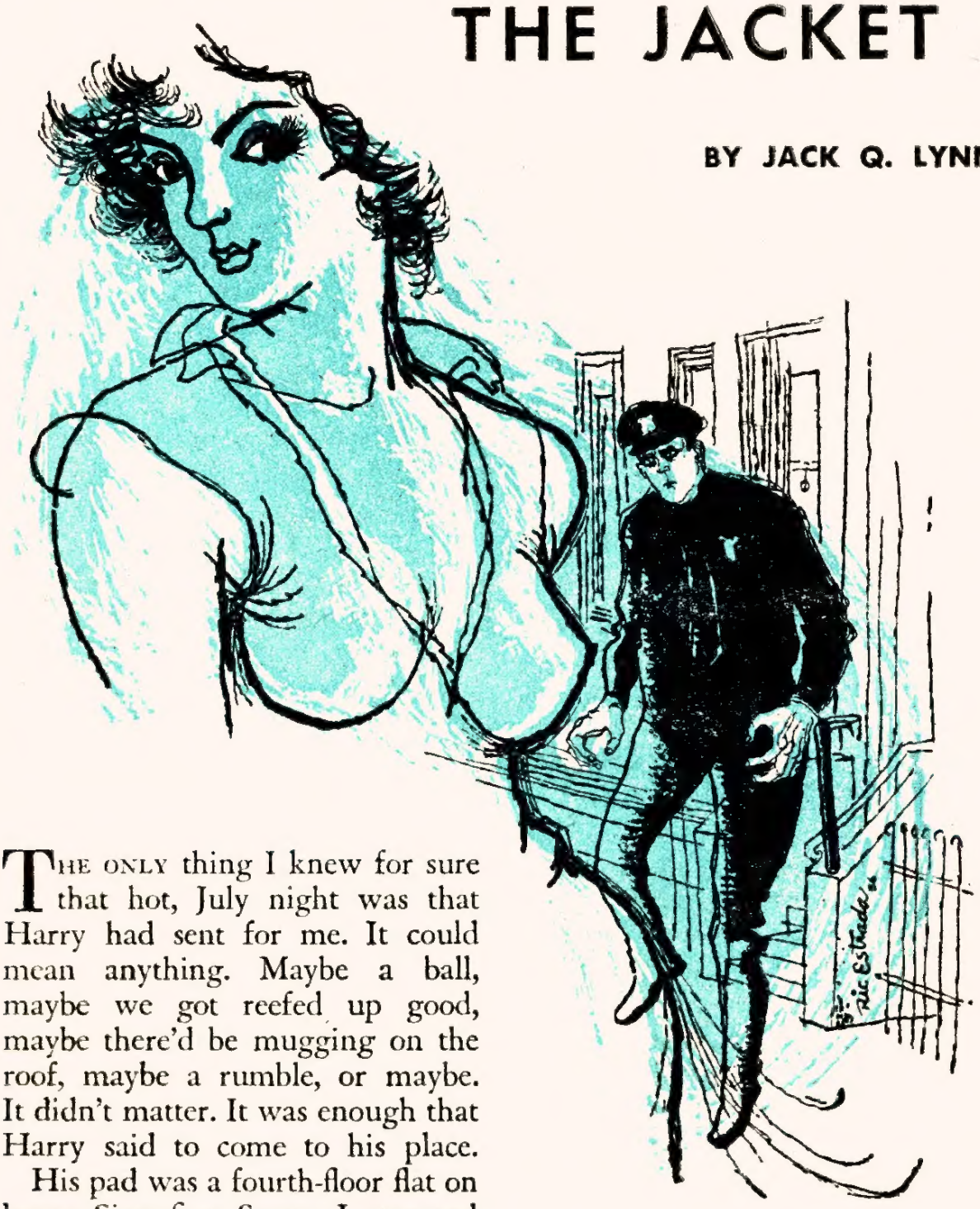
Her stiffened body he saw before him, and then he saw her plunge toward him and that was the last image his eyes saw. She sank her claws into his eyeballs.

He could see light and he could feel her paws around his neck. He seemed to be spinning, and yet he felt the roof beneath him. Numbness spread through his body. He stood up, trying to walk to the brick wall he could feel his way along it to the door. His arms and legs shivered, quaked. He took a step, stumbled, thrust his arms in front of him and touched—nothing. He lurched, stumbled again, tried to stop himself; then, his shins struck a barrier—the parapet—and space, air, was all around him, fast and cool. He felt her claws dig into the nape of his neck and in the seconds before his body hit the sidewalk the numbness was gone and he could think clearly and he knew that she was falling with him and because of him, bound to him in death.

Tammy's a very cool chick whose special treat for hot cops is the ice pick strapped between her legs.

THE JACKET

BY JACK Q. LYNN



THE ONLY thing I knew for sure that hot, July night was that Harry had sent for me. It could mean anything. Maybe a ball, maybe we got reefed up good, maybe there'd be mugging on the roof, maybe a rumble, or maybe. It didn't matter. It was enough that Harry said to come to his place.

His pad was a fourth-floor flat on lower Sixty-first Street. I stomped in shortly before nine o'clock and

stood just inside the door, looking around, taking in everything. Music came from a record player. Zing, war counselor of the Swans, sat in a deep chair, looking me up and down and grinning. There was an open pint in his hand. Harry wasn't in sight.

"Hi, ya, Tammy," Zing said softly.

He was my age, eighteen, a nice-looking stud, slim, black hair in a duck bump, bright brown eyes. I liked him. But he wasn't Harry.

He got out of the chair and came across the room to me, waving the pint and laughing easily. He put the bottle against his mouth and tilted his head. Then he coughed and grimaced and shoved the bottle at me. I took a big drink and gagged. Zing was laughing hard when I got the water out of my eyes.

"Ace-high stuff, chick."

"Crap," I said. "Where's Harry?"

He looked over his shoulder at a closed door and shrugged.

"What's on?"

He capped the bottle and pulled me against him. "Who knows? Come on, le's belly-rub."

I danced with him, and it gave my ego the big kick. He was a Swan, a Sixty-first Street stud, wild, reckless, proud, like all of the Swans. They hadn't gone for me in the beginning because my old man was drowning in money and instead of living in a rathole on their street I lived in a plush place outside their territory. I kicked around their hangout, a candy store, for a long time, wanting in, but all they gave me was the cold treatment. Then one night Harry came into the candy store.

Harry was older, almost thirty, over six feet tall with wide shoulders, flat muscles and curly blonde hair, a big man, a real big man—an ex-con on parole from a three year federal sentence. I wasn't sure just where he fit in with the Swans that first night. All I was sure of was I had a shape, I had the talent to go with the shape, and I had Harry reeling. "Class," he kept repeating. "Kid, you got real class." It was big trading power. Harry insisted the Swans take me in. Later I understood why they did. The Swans needed Harry because he was a pusher. He could feed them the stuff: weed, puff ball, H.

"Jeez, I'm itchy," Zing said, flushing my thoughts.

I nodded. "Me too. I wonder what . . ."

The voice behind me stopped me. "Now, ain't this cozy?"

I whirled away from Zing. It was Big Moe, president of the Swans. He had come out of the bedroom. He was small with long, slim hands and a sharp face. He didn't look like much, but he was tough and mean. The nabs had hauled him in twice, once for gang fighting and another time for threatening a recreation center lifeguard. I didn't like him, but there

wasn't anything I could do about that because I was scared of him.

He was coming toward us, smiling coldly. He said, "Flop, chicken."

"I ain't chicken!" I snapped, angered by his tone.

"I said, sit down!"

I went to a couch and sat down. Zing was already there. Big Moe squatted on his heels near us and Harry came into the room. He grinned at me and said cheerily, "Hello, Tammy."

I smiled back at him. "Hello."

Big Moe laughed without opening his mouth and took a cigarette package out of his pocket. He got out a stick. I knew what it was. Marijuana. I watched him fire up. He kept quiet, smoked slowly, but he was tense and restless. It was in his eyes, in the cheek nerve, in the smile somewhere behind his mouth.

Harry had a stick for me and another for Zing. He held a lighter while we lit up. Then he sat in the deep chair opposite us.

Now I was sure something was on. Because it was always like this with the Swans. They never went swinging in cold turkey. For a rumble they got on good. Some of the studs even hit the needle. I tried to figure it. Maybe we were going to kick in a couple of store windows. You know, guys that aren't paying protection. That was a hot item the Swans had. Or maybe we were going to roll some dumb cluck in a alley. Sometimes that paid off good.

Big Moe interrupted my thoughts. "You heavy, chick?"

He looked surprised, and I had a good idea what he meant. From where he was squatting, I figured he could see part of my thigh and the special leather sheath strapped there. I pulled up my skirt, revealing the sheath and the ice pick. It was my pick, okay, and I'd made the sheath myself, designing it to fit my leg. I wore it so the pick was on the outside. That way I could get to it fast. All I had to do was whip up my skirt and I was ready to do business.

"Jeez," Zing breathed. "Look at that."

I was staring at Harry. "When you told me to be here, I didn't know what to expect."

"It's okay," he said.

Big Moe was laughing out loud.

"Knock it off," I snapped.

"Easy, Tammy," Harry said. "Easy. Now, how about it? How would you like to have a jacket?"

For a second, I thought my heart was going to jump out of my chest. A jacket! The one thing that symbolized true membership in the Swans! I wanted one so bad, I'd strip naked and walk down the middle of Sixty-first Street, and Harry knew it.

He said, "Big Moe, here, says you gotta earn it."

"How?"

"By gettin' a nab."

I looked at Big Moe. He was grinning wisely. But what Harry had said made me shiver. I didn't like it. A rumble, okay. Busting up a store, okay. But a nab—it wasn't good.

"You want out, chicken?" Big Moe was boring into me with his eyes.

I said quickly, "I'm . . . I'm for anything you got in mind."

"I'm not," Zing said.

Big Moe's face clouded.

"It's trouble," Zing said. "The big trouble maybe. What we got when it's finished? Plenty of heat from the nabs and the newspapers. Thas all."

That was why Zing was war counselor of the Swans. He thought straight. I knew it, and Big Moe knew it. I watched Big Moe carefully as he turned it over in his mind. After a moment, he popped one hand into the other. "You, Tammy, what do you think?"

I kept on smoking without saying anything. I could feel the boom taking hold. My head felt light. It seemed to be drifting upward. But I had a helluva idea kicking around in the mist. It was a hot item. Maybe too hot . . .

"Tammy!" Big Moe snapped.

I got him in focus. "What say a real score?"

His eyes narrowed. "Feed me, slow, kid."

"One thing: you buy it and I get a jacket."

"Maybe."

"Nay, man. No maybe. I get a jacket. This is big."

"Feed me, then I decide."

I looked at Harry. He was staring at me. I saw his head bob and the smile on his mouth. He was with me all the way. I turned it over in my mind. What did I have to lose?

I gave it to them cool and easy then. And I didn't let them cut in. When I finished, Big Moe was staring at me like I was forty feet tall. He was thinking hard, and it was awful quiet in the room. I turned to Zing. He was bobbing his head thoughtfully.

"We could peddle the stuff to Felix," he said.

"You're sure about this old boy and his chick?" Big Moe asked.

I flashed him a look. "Certainly, I'm sure. They live just a square from me, and they went out with my old man and my old lady!"

Big Moe looked up at Harry. "What do you think?"

Harry nodded. "Sounds profitable."

Big Moe sat there a few seconds and then he snubbed the roach of his bomber on the floor and stood up. "Zing?"

"It's got a nice taste."

"Okay, chick," Big Moe said. "You got yourself a caper."

"I want a jacket. Remember?"

"And a jacket—if you fed us straight."

"It's straight."

Five minutes later we were on

the street and in Big Moe's rod, three in front. I told him to stop at a corner drug store. Zing went inside and bought a roll of wide adhesive tape. Then I told Big Moe how to get to the place.

The house was back from the street. There was a sloping lawn with a sidewalk up the middle, a waisthigh-hedge flanking the sidewalk and the front of the house, and a street lamp out front.

We left the rod a couple of houses down the street and walked up to the place, moving slow while I looked it over. "It's okay," I said finally. "Now all we gotta do is sweat them out." I worked through the waist-high hedge near the front porch. "In here."

Turning, I looked toward the street. It was neat. Anybody coming up the walk would be outlined against the light from the street lamp. And that's just the way the Thompsons would come home because I knew they were with my old man and old lady.

The waiting was worse than I had expected. I was nervous and tense. Once, Big Moe touched my arm and I went up a foot. Why didn't those damn people show? I thought. I laughed out loud. Now what the hell was so funny? I used the bottom of my sweater and wiped my neck. It was hot, sticky hot, with no air moving, difficult to get a good breath. I laughed again. It was the reefer, I decided. I was feeling a little high.

When I saw my old man's rod stop under the street lamp, no sound got past the construction in my throat. Then it all came out fast. "It's them!" I hissed.

I watched the Thompsons pile out and start up the walk old man Thompson limping heavily to his left. I saw my old man drive away from the curb and I moved deeper into the shadow of the hedge.

"Hey, where are you goin'?" Big Moe whispered.

"Out of sight, you dumb punk. You don't want them seein' me, do you? They know me!"

"Zing, you take the hen," he whispered.

I was deep in the shadow, my muscles quivering for action, when Big Moe and Zing broke out of the hedge. I heard the sound of flesh against flesh and the sound of scuffling. I wanted to look out, but I couldn't.

"Okay, chick," Big Moe hissed finally.

I went through the hedge. I could see everything in the light from the street lamp. Mrs. Thompson was sprawled face down on the front steps with her dress almost up to her hips, exposing her garters, but she didn't know it because she was out cold. Zing was bent over her, using the adhesive tape. He had her wrists lashed together behind her back, and there was one strip across her eyes. He was putting another strip across her mouth.

Big Moe had Thompson braced

against his body, one arm across his chest, the other pushing the old man's arm up his back until I thought it would snap. Tape covered his eyes and mouth, and he stood very still.

I had no sympathy. I went through his pockets fast and came up with some keys. There was to be no talking from me because Thompson might recognize my voice. I nodded my head at Big Moe.

He said, "Get the hen in the house."

I watched Zing fasten his hands in Mrs. Thompson's arm pits and drag her up the steps. Thompson struggled then.

Big Moe told him, "She ain't gonna bleed, Dad. So you just stay cool."

I found the key for the front door and opened it. Zing pulled Mrs. Thompson inside and tossed her on a couch.

"You hang tight," I told him. "And keep her quiet!" I started out of the room.

"Tammy!"

I looked back at him over my shoulder. There was a wise expression on his face. He said, "You and Big Moe—you be damn sure you get back here or I feed the nabs."

"We'll be back."

I went into the kitchen then and found a large paper sack. Outside again, Big Moe said, "Get the rod."

I drove the car up front and Big Moe dumped Thompson on the floor in back and piled in with him. I hit for the jewelry store. It was a twelve minute drive.

At the store, I found the key that opened the front door and we went inside quickly. Light coming in from the street lamps fell on the safe near the rear of the store.

"Open up." Big Moe gave Thompson a shove.

I watched Thompson as he put his hands out in front of him, feeling blindly. He reached the safe, and then he stood very still.

"Don't make us kill your hen, Dad," Big Moe said.

Thompson remained still. It puzzled me for a moment then I figured I knew what his trouble was. I pulled Big Moe's ear close to my mouth and whispered, "He has to see the numbers. I'll get out of sight, then you let him see. Soon as he has the box open, get the tape back on his eyes."

I moved away from them and hunched down in an aisle. It was black down low, and I was out of sight. In another minute, I heard the safe door swing open.

"Okay," Big Moe said.

There was more in the safe than I had expected. Rings, watches, bracelets, loose rocks. I scooped them into the paper sack fast, and then I froze. The siren was a distant whine, coming fast.

And just like that I knew we had goofed. Some way Thompson had tripped an alarm in the box.

I whirled around.

Big Moe swung his fist against Thompson's head, right behind the ear, and Thompson folded into the floor with a groan. Then I saw Big Moe pounding down an aisle toward the front door.

The dirty slob was running out on me! I screamed after him, but he went through the front door fast, then pulled up as if not sure which way to go. The police car screamed up out front. I saw Big Moe start up the street. But he didn't have a chance. A nab cut him down with one shot.

I watched the nabs pile out of their rod and walk up to where Big Moe was heaped up on the sidewalk. People closed a circle around them, and I knew it was my chance. I eased out the front door of the store and walked slowly toward Big Moe's rod. I thought I'd never make it. All I wanted to do was run. Inside the rod, I saw the key in the ignition switch. I put the sack of rocks on the seat beside me and turned the key.

That was when the voice cried out, "Hey, that girl! She just came out of the store! Stop her! Somebody stop . . ."

But that was all I heard because I had the rod in the traffic and I was moving fast. No bullets banged after me. Too many other rods on the street maybe. I whined around one corner, raced a block, went around another corner, then hit a third. Nobody behind me, and I was surprised. Had I lost the nabs that easy? What stupid studs they must be! But where was I going? What was I going to do? What could I do with the sack of rocks on the seat beside me?

Zing! Zing would know what to do!

But I couldn't go to him. He was at the Thompson house. Maybe the nabs were heading there, already. I couldn't take a chance. There was only one place to go. Harry's place.

He met me at the door and almost knocked me back down the stairs.

"Harry!" I cried out.

"Beat it, Tammy!" he hissed. "You're hot! It's on the radio, already!"

"Harry!"

He slammed the door in my face and I heard the lock click.

I stood there for several seconds, panicing. Then I thought about the roof—where Harry sometimes took me. It would be quiet up there.

I went up.

The night was hot, but up high there was a whisp of breeze. I felt it fanning my face as I hunched over the thigh-high parapet and looked down on Sixty-first Street five decks below. There were people down there. It looked like everybody was out. How many of them were nabs? I wondered.

I stood there a long time before I got some of the fear out of me and started to think straight. What

was I doing up there on the roof? Why didn't I just go down and go home? The rod was ditched in an alley two squares away. Nobody saw me unload it. So why didn't I go home? Who would stop a girl walking down the street just because she had a sack in her hand?

I kicked it around in my mind, and then I decided I had to take a chance. Crossing the tar to the fire ladder, I went over the side. The alley was black. Easing through the darkness to the alley entrance, I stood watching for the bus. When I saw it coming, I scooted toward the corner and climbed on fast.

I felt better then. The nabs wouldn't be looking for me on a bus. They might be looking for me along Sixty-first Street. They might comb the street thoroughly, they might ask questions. But they wouldn't get answers. Because nobody on Sixty-first Street knew from straight up when it was nabs asking questions.

Anyway, how would the nabs know it was me they were after?

I got off the bus at the corner a half a square from my place. It was quiet there in the residential area, and I stood in the ring of light under the street lamp for a moment. Down toward my place it was dark. It seemed too dark and too quiet. But what could I do?

I hit off at a rapid pace, the sack of rocks clutched firmly in my hand. I was less than a hundred yards from the sidewalk that turned up to my house when the shadow stepped away from a tree.

"Tammy."

I froze. My heart thumped wildly and my stomach was a cold knot. I peered through the darkness, squinting, trying to see. And then the shadow shuffled toward me and I recognized Zing.

"Man, you . . ."

"Shut up! he snapped.

His hand was a steel clamp on my arm as he propelled me across the sidewalk toward the street. I saw the rod. He shoved me inside, climbed over me, and got under the wheel. Then he kicked over the motor and we breezed.

"Where did you get this heap?" I rasped.

"Now where the hell *would* I get it?"

"Jees, you didn't lift it!"

"Naw, a stud walks up to me on the street and says, Here, Zing, old man, you got nabs hot on your tail. Take my rod. Take it and . . ."

"Okay," I said sourly, cutting him off. "So you got a rod."

"I got more than that, chick. I got a big, hard heart for you and a dirty stud named Big Moe. I got . . ."

"The nabs cut down Big Moe," I said, giving it to him fast. I told him what had happened and how Harry had turned me out, and then how I had gone up to the roof.

"You tramp!" he snarled.

I stared at him. I could see his

face and hands in the dashlight. He was tense and ready for action. "What's bitin' you, man? I've got the rocks."

"You left me sittin' for the nabs!"

"Jees, I couldn't come near that place! I had them on my tail!"

"So what if they hadn't made a lot of noise pulling up out front! As it was, I just got out the back door."

"You got out, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I got out."

He said it, but I didn't like the way he said it. He was talking real tight-lipped, acting like trouble.

I slid a glance at him. "Where we goin'?"

"My place."

"Is that smart?"

"You got a better place?"

"No, I guess not."

"Okay, then shut up!"

And that was that. I didn't like it but I couldn't argue. Zing was too big, too mean for me.

We unloaded the rod and walked the last four squares to his place. He lived in a cold-water flat with his sister. She wasn't there nights; she was rolling dough in some bake shop.

"Okay," I said when we were inside. "Now what are we gonna do?" I flopped on my back on a couch. Zing slouched in a chair opposite me with his feet stuck out in front of him, staring at them like they were gold.

"I'm not sure," he said without looking up.

"Can we unload the rocks?"

"It ain't good, Tammy. Maybe they're real hot items now with Big Moe cut down. And we don't know about that Thompson guy. Maybe Big Moe killed him. Maybe Felix won't take the stuff now. Maybe . . ."

The heavy knuckles on the door stopped Zing. He froze halfway out of the chair, staring at the door.

I finally got words past the knot in my throat. "W-who's that?"

"Shut up!"

The voice outside the door said, "Open up, you two. I know you're in there. I saw you come up."

The voice froze my heart. I knew it like I knew my father's. It was Rollins, a no-good nab. Plain clothes. He was in narcotics. He'd been around a lot lately. And he knew me. But he'd never bleated to my old man about me because he was a guy with a real free hand and he liked the way I was stacked up. In the past, I'd let him have his way a couple of times just to keep his tongue from wagging. Now . . .

"Come on, come on," he said impatiently.

What was I going to do with the rocks? I looked around wildly. And then I jammed the sack under the couch and ripped off my sweater and flopped flat on my back. "Get over here!" I hissed at Zing.

"Wha . . ."

"Move, damnit!"

He came to me fast. I reached

up and pulled him down on top of me and fastened my mouth on his. Rollins didn't have trouble forcing the door. I didn't look up, but I knew he was towering over us.

"Okay, bust it up, love birds," he snapped.

I pushed Zing off of me then and sat up straight. "God, it's getting so a girl can't have . . ."

"Forget it," Rollins said, his eyes going over me greedily. I saw him wet his lips, and then he grinned nastily. "You've got big trouble, punks."

"Who's got troubles?" Zing said sourly.

"Don't get smart. Where's the stuff?"

"We ain't on," I whined. "Honest, man, we ain't had a puff all . . ."

"Knock it!" Rollins' eyes hung on my bra a long moment before he said, "Come on, where is it?"

"I told you, we ain't on."

"The stuff from the jewelry store, kid."

"What jewelry store?" Zing asked.

Rollins was quick. His arm came around in a wide swing and his fist almost took Zing's head off. Zing came up from the floor slow, shaking himself. But he only got to his knees. Rollins smashed his fist on Zing's head, driving him into the floor again. This time Zing got his head up and that was all. Rollins kicked him like his head was a football and Zing flopped. I looked down on him with horror gripping my stomach. He was awful quiet and his head was twisted funny. Rollins was kneeling over him. Suddenly, he was on his feet and back in front of me. His face was tight.

"Don't worry, kid. He ain't dead."

"God, I thought you had killed . . ."

"You think the world would miss him?"

He was looking at me close, and staring up at his face I got a glimmer of hope. It was the look, the sweating eager look. I'd seen it there before and I knew what he was thinking. It was a chance. I took a deep breath for his benefit and asked softly, "How did you know about me and Zing?"

His eyes, hot and heavy, were all over me. "When they told me it was Big Moe they picked up at that rock shop and that a girl run out of the dump, I did some figuring. Then the Thompson woman got herself raped and that wasn't hard either. Big Moe, Tammy, Zing —one, two, three. It was that easy. All I had to do was hang around outside this place."

"Zing raped . . ."

But I didn't finish it because Rollins suddenly leaned over me. His face hovered inches above mine, and his breathing was raspy. I felt his fingers working on my skirt. "Kid," he said, "you ready to deal? I go for you, you know that. So I keep my mouth shut and

we take the stuff and go on a long trip—a real long trip."

I grabbed his wrist, stopping his hand. What he had just said had shaken me. He was cutting himself in! That must mean . . . I asked him, "You figure this out all by yourself, man?"

"All by myself."

"Nobody knows you're here? Nobody knows about me and Zing?"

He grinned wisely. "Nobody."

I dropped my hand beside my thigh without taking my eyes off of his face, and my fingers worked my skirt up, then closed around the wood handle of the ice pick. Slowly, I eased the pick out of the sheath and twisted it until the needle-like point was sticking straight at Rollins' back.

"Look down there, man," I said softly. "Look at my legs."

He twisted his head, and the ice pick went into his eye so easy it surprised me. I felt something warm squirt on my stomach, and then Rollins flopped on me.

I moved fast then. I had to get out of the flat, out of the neighborhood, out of town. I shoved Rollins off of me to the floor and gt up and pulled the sweater over my head. Then I got the sack of rocks out from under the couch. They could take me a long way. There was the rod Zing had left down the street. Maybe . . .

The rod was where we had left it. I looked around. There was some traffic and some people ahead of me on the sidewalk, but it looked okay. No nabs. I marched up to the rod like it was mine and piled inside. I was safe. All I had to do . . .

God, no key!

I looked around wildly. It couldn't be! Zing left the key in the rod, didn't he? He had to! Black fear piled up inside me. I searched the seat frantically and looked up into the face of the beat cop.

"Can I help . . ."

It was too much. I screamed shrilly and threw the sack of rocks at him. Then I bailed out, tripped over the curbing and sprawled flat on the sidewalk. The cop was on me fast.

I went crazy wild, lashing out at him with my foot. I hit something solid. He cried out sharply, but he didn't let go of me. He jerked me up on my feet and pinned me against a brick building.

"Take it easy, youngster," he said sharply.

People gathered around us. I was shaking hard, but I couldn't move. I saw the prowl car pull into the curb and two more nabs moved toward me. One of them said, "Trouble?"

The nab holding me, said, "Something wrong. I don't know what. But this youngster is a wildcat."

"Officer, officer! Look at all these jools!" It was the shrill voice of an old woman. She was coming

across the sidewalk toward us and she was carrying the sack of rocks. One of the prowl cops took the sack from her and looked inside.

He muttered something I didn't hear and then his hand came out of the sack and his fist was full of glittering objects. A wrist watch dangled from one finger.

I struggled wildly.

The nab holding me said, "Okay, wildcat, you've had it." They moved me toward the prowl car.

At the crib, I tried to bluff my way out of everything, but the nabs knew too much. They picked up too many pieces and put them together—especially after Zing's sister came home and found her brother and Rollins. The nabs discovered my pick then and I gave up and told them the story.

"You see," I said, " all I wanted was this jacket . . ."

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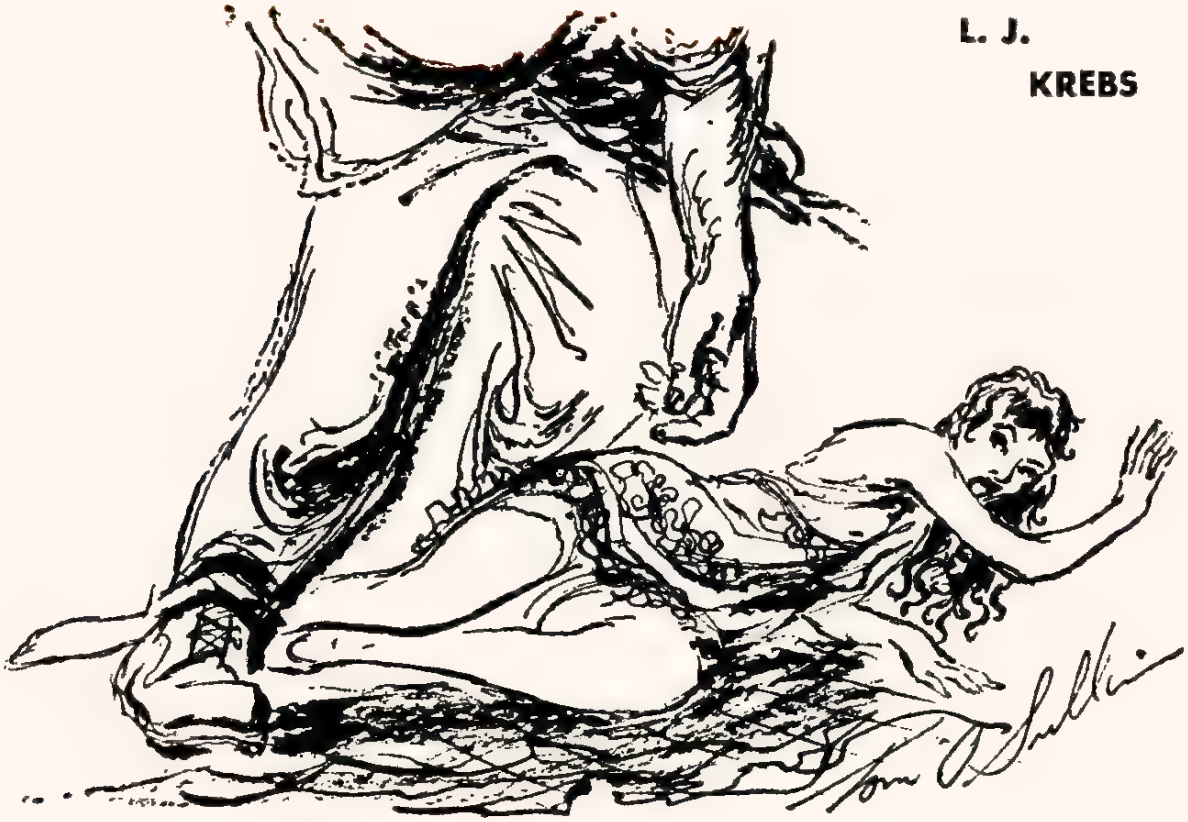
BIG HANDS

BY
L. J.
KREBS



George's hands were grotesque and people teased him about them so he did the only thing he could do. He destroyed them.

Well now, it's hard to tell. Depends on how you look at it. Sure, I lost—in a way. But then, I gained, too. Yes, sir.

My Ma was right. I used to have one hell of a temper. "George, you watch out now," she'd say. "You're your own worst enemy. You'll lose your temper some day and really regret it. You mark my words."

Course it's easy to talk about other people's shortcomings. If you was as big as I was, and as homely, and if you had hands the size of mine, you might be teased too. And if you got teased as much as I did, you'd lose your temper plenty—especially when you knew you could whip the tar out of the guys doing the teasing.

I was just a kid that summer, not long out of school. I'd quit the year before and got a job down in the freight yards. I was big enough

to do a man's work and I got a man's paycheck. Kept the family fed and the other kids in school. Up until it happened anyway.

Jim Scheidt's birthday was the night. Jim and I had gone to school together, but he'd quit before I did, lied about his age and went in the army for two or three years. When he came back that summer, he had a little money saved up, so he didn't get a job right away. He just sort of took it easy for awhile.

His birthday was on the 26th of July, a day I don't reckon to forget too easy. Him and me and a couple of other guys decided to celebrate, so he took us out to Henry's Hideaway, a pretty nice roadhouse out on highway 45, not too far from the new drive-in theatre. We sat around drinking, listening to the jukebox and talking about one thing and another.

Somewhere along in the evening we started drinking boilermakers and the other two guys got pretty looped. I was kinda woozy myself, but Jim seemed to be enjoying himself. He looked at the other two jokers, slumped on the table, and then he looked at me.

"Hell, you really know how to stow it, don't you? You must have a gut to match those hands of yours."

"Yeah," I said. "My hands and your mouth. Both too big."

"Take it easy, George," he said. "I was only kidding." He knew I was sore. "Look, let's take these punks home and go out looking for something."

"Suits me," I said.

We took these other two guys home and then headed down toward the yards. I knew the house he stopped at, even though I'd never been inside. It was right on the corner and looked like any other house, except all the curtains were closed and you could hear music and a lot of laughing when you got up to the door. Jim knocked. Pretty soon a woman opened the door.

"What do you want?" she said, after giving us the once-over.

"What've you got?" Jim said, and laughs.

"Whatever it is," she said, "you're too young for it." She started to close the door.

"Hey, look," Jim said, pushing the door back open. "Take it easy. That's a hell of a way to treat a guy on his birthday." While he was talking, he walked in. I followed.

"Birthday? Don't kid me," she said, but she didn't make any move to show us out. "I suppose next you'll be wanting a present."

Jim laughed at that one. So did I. "Well," he said, "I'll make you a deal. You give me a present and I'll give you one." He gave her a big wink and then pulled a ten-spot out of his pocket.

The dame, who was sort of blonde and not bad looking, took

the ten-spot without even looking at it and tucked it down the front of her dress. Then she turned to me.

"I know you—you work in the yards, don't you?"

I nodded.

"You're an easy one to remember. Hands like hams—with a face to match." She started laughing real loud like she'd said something funny, and poked Jim in the ribs. He laughed too, but just a little. He took a look at me to see if I was mad. I was, but not showing it. I just kept quiet.

"Suppose it's your birthday too. Bring your piggybank, sonny?"

I know when enough's enough, so I told Jim I'd wait outside in the car for him. I knew if she opened her trap again I'd have given her a smack in the face. "Take your time," I told Jim as I walked out the door.

I was still so mad when I got to the car that I decided to walk home. Figured the walk would cool me off. I walked down to the square, cut over and was halfway through the park when I spotted her. She was sitting on a bench, alone, like she was waiting for someone. I'd never seen her before. I stopped a minute and then walked over to where she was sitting.

"Hello," I said, casual-like.

She looked at me a moment or two, like she couldn't make up her mind to speak to me or not. She shrugged finally and said hello.

"Waiting for someone?"

"Maybe." She sounded bored now.

"Will I do?" I asked, wondering if my voice was shaking. I was afraid to hear what she'd say.

She thought this over for a while and then got up from the bench. "Probably," she said, and puts her arm in mine. "Let's go for a walk —over there where it's cool."

She started walking toward a small hill over near the pond. We got to talking and she told me how she was visiting her aunt here and what a dump the town is. She told me all the places she's been. She talked like she knew her way around.

"Let's sit down," she said, after we got to the top of the hill. It's pretty quiet up there and we could see all the town lights below. The town looks bigger at night.

She lit a cigarette and I got a good look at her face. She was some doll. I waited until she was finished smoking and then I put my arm around her. She didn't seem to mind, so I pulled her closer and kissed her. She seemed to like that too, at first. Then she pulled away.

"What've you been drinking?" she said. "You smell like a bar."

"Just a little beer—and whiskey."

"A little. You sure you're not drunk? I don't want anything to do with a drunk."

I told her I wasn't drunk and tried to kiss her again. She turned her head and pushed away from me.

"Let me go. You're drunk. Get your big hands off me." She was struggling a bit, but not too much. I figured she was just trying to be lady-like about all this. Probably just needs a little encouragement, I thought, so I pushed her back on the ground and tried to kiss her again. No soap.

"Get your hands off me," she said, only louder than before. I got scared, so I let her up. She sat there a minute, re-arranging her dress. "Keep those big farmer's hands to yourself from now on. Holy smoke, you ought to be in the circus with those hands."

That's when I really lost my temper. This girl, this no-good girl, was making fun of my hands. Just because she thought I was drunk she'd changed her mind. Well, I hadn't changed mine. I pinned her arms to the ground and she screamed—just once. That made me madder than ever. My hands went around her throat. I knew then what I was going to do, right as soon as I felt her warm throat and saw her stare up at me like she was sorry or something. But I knew it was too late.

Then everything went screwy. I remember standing over her, knowing she was dead, and I remember looking at my hands. Then I started running down the hill. I knew I'd get caught. I just wanted to beat them to it. I ran all the way to the yards. I could hear the switch engine a block away. Just as it came along I knelt down by the track. I heard the engineer yell, but by that time I was watching the blood foam down my arms and wondering why it didn't hurt. Then I blacked out.

Like I say, it depends on how you look at it. Don't lose my temper any more, that's for sure. Nobody kids me about my hands either. And for a while there I got a check from the state every month.

Funny part though is about that girl. Didn't kill her after all. And when she heard what I did, she didn't even prefer charges. Scared, I guess.

Sure, Ma was right.

Pencil, mister?

To wile away the long boring hours of evening the big men thought of this ingenious game of chance.

THE MURDER POOL

BY ROBERT STEPHENS

I HEAR you're in the pool tonight," Newell said.

"That's right." Jim Crane drank a swallow of brandy. He did not miss his partner's quick look at the brandy glass. Hopeful perhaps. Crane had always been a heavy drinker; it would be nice for Newell if he slipped over the line into alcoholism.

"I've never been in the pool," Newell said. "Can't risk that kind of money. Besides, it would bother

me. You know—betting on death—on murder."

Crane smiled. Newell was probably lying. He'd bet all right. On a sure thing. Crane deliberately drank the rest of his brandy, watching Newell. Once again the quick, interested glance.

"Don't worry Don," Crane said. "I can handle this stuff. I was having hangovers when I was seven. Big ones."

"Must have been a rough childhood," Newell said. He waited. Crane knew his partner was encouraging him to go on. Newell wanted to know everything about everyone. Knowledge was power. Crane grinned. He felt the brandy. It had a warmth, a kind of singing lift that whiskey couldn't furnish. Studying Newell, Crane knew he had used him long enough. It was time to get rid of him. Even now he might have suspected about his wife. Eloise Newell and Crane saw a lot of each other these days.

"About your childhood," Newell said. "You never mentioned it."

Crane began to tell him about it. He was proud of the way he had come up from the bottom, with the odds a million to one against him. And now, from the window of the most exclusive club in the city he could see the old neighborhood, Fifth and Main, skid row, Wino Boulevard. Crane remembered the years with the old man, years in dingy hotel rooms with the constant bottle of wine, mostly muscatel or sherry unless there was enough money for brandy. Crane had spent his time after school hunting along the street and in the bars, looking for his father and hoping there would be enough money for some food. Finally, when he was eleven, he left. He remembered the old man passed out, lying face down on the bed in the cheap hotel room. It was vivid even now as he told about it. There was a big fly circling over a wine bottle on the floor. Jim Crane had looked at his father for a while and then made his choice. He walked out of the room and never saw his father again.

Newell nodded. "And now you're a self made man. With money enough to bet the pool. By the way—" He gestured toward the bar. "The action has started."

Crane turned and saw that Slade the bartender had put two empty wine glasses on the special shelf. Two down—one to go. Crane felt a sudden surge of excitement which he controlled carefully.

"I've got 3, 4, and 5," Crane said. "Twenty thousand." He heard Don Newell's sharp intake of breath. "Let's have a drink, Don."

The pool itself was simple and expensive. Somebody had got the idea from the box in the lower corner of one of the metropolitan papers. The box was a crime tally for each twenty four hour period. It listed the number of rapes, armed robberies, burglaries and murders.

The pool was set up for murders and Slade the bartender ran it. He had a deal with two police beat reporters who phoned in the murders as soon as they were reported. Each murder was marked by a wine glass on the special shelf.

At the bar Newell had a tall drink and Crane ordered another brandy.

"I'd think you'd watch that stuff, Jim," Newell said. "With your childhood anything could happen. Look, do you ever get drunk and black out? With no recall?"

"None of your damned business, Don," Crane said evenly. Instantly he regretted it. He shouldn't have let Newell get to him; above all he shouldn't have showed it. Now Newell had his answer. Crane did draw blanks once in a while.

Slade's phone behind the bar rang once, discreet and muted. Behind him Crane could feel the tension of the other club members. There was a stillness, a waiting. Slade listened, saying nothing. After a minute he hung up. More men moved to the bar, all watching Slade, waiting for him to pick up a wine glass, polish it carefully. Slade smiled, motionless, prolonging the tension.

"Gentlemen," he said finally. "There's no score there, but it's one to watch. Oh yes, it's one to watch all right. The victim is not expected to live. Multiple stab wounds. Back and chest. Severe internal hemorrhage."

"Jesus," Newell said. "If he dies before midnight you're in the scoring bracket. Four hours to go. You're a winner, Jim."

"A winner." The man one stool away was looking at Crane. "That pool is a goddamned horrible thing. I played the pool for a while . . ." Crane recognized him, an investment broker. He was drunk. Newell watched with his look of predatory interest.

"I can tell you about it," the broker went on, "because you couldn't prove anything even if you wanted to. I was playing with my firm's money. But I won."

"Go on," Newell said. "What happened?"

"I was sitting outside a hospital where a man was dying. He'd been shot and he was fighting to live. But I was sitting in my car willing him to die." The broker took a gulp of his drink. "He died at 11:57. Maybe he would have lived if I hadn't been there, concentrating, even praying." He got up abruptly and left the bar.

Newell stared into his drink. "You might be doing that, Jim. Willing that man to die. The one with the stab wounds."

"I might." Crane smiled. "But I don't believe in thought waves."

"I do," Don Newell said. "They've done some work on it. It's possible. A person could commit a murder—"

Crane banged his glass down impatiently. "I'll tell you the way it

is. So you kill somebody by willing them to die. Or you use a gun or a knife. This is a jungle. We're all trying to hack each other to pieces. Everybody knows it. But most people are scared. They want to be taken care of. So they don't admit it's all one big bloody jungle."

"You feel that way because of your childhood," Newell said. He finished his drink. "Jim, you're a first class bastard." He got up and walked away from the bar.

Crane had another brandy. It felt good, the surging warmth in his body, the feeling of sudden clarity in his mind. He had a feeling of certainty, that this was his night, that he would win. It was like seducing a woman and knowing that no matter what happened you would succeed this night. He thought of Eloise Newell. He had had that same feeling of certainty, a certainty that she would sleep with him that night and she had.

"Damn you," she said. And then she was taking off her clothes. Eloise had not thought about marriage vows or moral principles; she had thought only about her own need. The jungle was still the jungle.

The phone rang again. Slade listened, then made his announcement.

"He's still alive. There was a surgeon in town, a chest specialist. An interne called him, and he's operating right now."

Crane signalled for another drink and Slade came to refill his glass.

"Who is this guy?" Crane asked. "How come he rates a specialist? He must be big."

"No." Slade poured, generously. "A bum, a wino. Maybe this surgeon just needed a little practice." Incongrously Slade smiled.

"Yes." Crane drank. "Why shouldn't he get in some practice. A wino is dead already. They're zombies. Winos don't count."

He thought suddenly of his father. It could be his father in there, with the surgeon going into his chest. But no. The old man would be dead by now. His liver was failing and he'd had two bouts with pneumonia, and that had been years ago.

Crane left the bar and walked the length of the main lounge to the big window. A light rain had started to fall, like a thin wool blanket over the lights of the city. Below in the distance he could see the neon lights of Third and Main, the jungle. Even in the rain the drunks would still be on the street, gray and shapeless in old overcoats, some just in shirt sleeves. They would be drifting along the street, constantly moving, going nowhere. They would be asleep in doorways or huddled in an alley in a circle, passing the bottle like celebrants of some strange ritual. And at eleven the roundup would start. The police van would nose down main, spotting the drunks in the doorways. They had tough boys

on those wagons. They'd pick them up, a goon on each side and throw them into the van. He'd seen the old man thrown in one night. They threw him so hard his head struck the front panel. They were big, the wagon cops. What they did would sicken an ordinary person. But why be soft hearted about a wino. A wino is nothing, living in his drugged gray world, feeling nothing, seeing nothing . . .

At ten o'clock there were still only two glasses on the special shelf. The stab victim at the receiving hospital was still alive. The surgery was over and the patient lay in the recovery room. Crane sat at the bar, drinking.

"He's still one to watch, gentlemen," Slade said cheerfully. "Of course they may save him—modern medicine can work miracles."

"Save him for what?" Crane asked. Slade filled his glass and shrugged apologetically. They probably would save him, Crane felt. For the bottle of muscatel and the roundup, for the rescue mission beans and slow death.

Crane straightened suddenly as the idea came to him. It came as a visual image, detailed and clear. He saw himself at Second and Main, drifting with the faceless gray crowd. He wore old clothes, and under his coat he held a knife. He rose suddenly. Slade looked at him and smiled, a smile of strange understanding. It was as though Slade knew what Crane was going to do.

In his apartment Crane changed quickly into his hunting clothes, and as an after thought he put on tennis shoes. He had a drink from a bottle of cognac on the kitchen shelf and then he opened the knife drawer. The butcher knife was a mass produced job, impossible to trace. Crane held it in the light for a long time, studying the blade. He poured a glass of cognac and took it to the front room. When he finally stood up his legs felt strangely light. There was a numb dream-like quality to his movements. He noted the time. Ten thirty. An hour and a half before the pool would end. Half an hour till the 11 o'clock roundup.

Crane put on his jacket and went outside. He drove through deserted streets and parked near Second and Main. It had been years, but things were the same here. At the Midnight Mission the bums stood in the rain in a straggling line, waiting for the beans and the prayers. And they were checking them out for bunks. Through the bluish frosted glass of the window Crane could see the louse light swinging up and down. No bunk if you were lousy.

In a doorway a figure lay face down, an empty bottle beside him. Meat for the 11 o'clock roundup. A big gaunt man staggered past, talking to himself. Crane paused. The one in the doorway. He moved close to the building and slipped the butcher knife from his pocket. A headache started at the back of

his skull, sudden and blinding. He slipped the knife under his coat as a drunk passed, eyeing the empty bottle lying beside the man in the doorway.

Crane knelt in the doorway and reached under the man. He brought the knife up sharply, under the rib cage into the heart. There was no sound beyond a faint sigh. Crane stabbed twice more and left the knife protruding from the back. He stood up and walked down the street in the rain. The roundup would get the body at 11. They would notice the knife and radio homicide. There would be three glasses on Slade's shelf back at the club. The headache was worse now, like an iron cap over his head. He was not conscious of driving home. In the apartment he changed and took a cab back to the club.

Crane was at the bar at eleven thirty when the phone rang. There were four people now, watching, waiting. They were silent as Slade answered the phone.

"Yes," Slade said, his voice neutral. "Thank you." He hung up. "The stab victim died," he said softly. "Post operative shock."

It took Crane a few seconds to realize it. He would have won without knifing the wino in the doorway. He drank some brandy and the headache began to fade, leaving him mind numb. It was hard to formulate a thought, as though his mind were shrouded in folds of cotton.

So the wino was dead. It didn't matter. He'd been dead already. Crane had a sudden mental picture of his father that day in the hotel room, face down across the bed. The image of his father blended into the image of the shapeless figure in the doorway . . .

The phone rang again at quarter to twelve. Slade's voice was gentle, apologetic as he made the announcement. An unemployed aircraft worker had wiped out his family with an Army .45 before killing himself.

"You can never tell, gentlemen," Slade said. "It's like the horse races —Now I myself would have handicapped it for a score of three, perhaps four. Your big scores usually come in the summer months. And yet tonight we have six."

Seven Crane thought. *Seven* by this time they should have found the one in the doorway. But it didn't matter. He slept at the club that night, a restless, dream-laden sleep. In the morning he had trouble waking, and there were echoes in his head.

At his office it took him several seconds to answer his secretary when she spoke. After she had gone, looking back at him over her shoulder, Crane went out for a drink. After the first brandy he could think with a measure of clarity. He phoned a detective agency he had used before. "I want the name of a man who died last night at receiving hospital of stab

wounds. I also want the name of a man who was stabbed last night in a doorway near Second and Main. As soon as possible."

Crane smoked a cigarette. He could think now, and he knew what the trouble was. It was unreasonable he knew, but the fear was there. Jim Crane was afraid he had killed his father. It was impossible of course. His father could hardly be alive, after the years.

Crane drank brandy and after two hours phoned the agency. The man in the hospital had been named Clark. No other stab victim had been reported. Crane sat in the booth with the receiver in his hand. Why hadn't they reported the body in the doorway? It was a murder. The knife was still in the man. There was something very wrong. Crane felt the dimness closing in on his mind again. He thought of getting some kind of treatment. He was an intelligent man. He could go to a doctor. They had psychiatrists who could treat this sort of thing. But then—he could hardly go to a doctor and confess that he'd murdered a man. "I've killed a man and I have this delusion it's my father." Crane shook his head. For a moment it occurred to him that he might not have killed anyone at all. He might just have dreamed it. But of course that was impossible. He remembered it all too clearly.

Suddenly the answer came to him with great clarity. He felt a gladness, a warm happiness that he had not felt since he was a child. The answer was simple. He would have to find his father.

The wino's were lined up at the Blood Center. You could get four bucks for donating a pint of blood. Crane smiled. Dad might be in the center. Four dollars could buy a pretty good drunk. He went inside and stood, searching the faces, smiling to himself. If the old man wasn't here he'd be at the Mission in a bar. Crane knew he could find him.

He did not hear the attendant speak to him. He felt a hand grasp his shoulder and turned slowly, still smiling.

"You've had too much buddy. Take a couple of laps around the block and come back."

Crane smiled and explained about how he was looking for his dad. Then he went out on to the street. He began to walk slowly, searching each face that passed. He thought about the room in the big hotel on the corner. Sometimes dad would be sober and the two of them would sit around and read and talk together and everything would be all right. Crane smiled. He had forgotten Don Newell, Slade, the business. Only one thing mattered and that was to find his father and then, he knew, everything would be all right. He turned in at a bar and felt in his pocket for a coin. He ordered a glass of wine, muscatel.

Caught in the Act

BY NIEL FRANKLIN

THE sensation terrified her. She lay on her left side and the dead weight of her paralyzed body seemed crowded by some unseen force that pressed her against the floor.

A slight tingling sensation in her right hand telegraphed through the deadness of her body and added

The old dame lay on the floor, paralyzed and dying. It was a good thing cause this way she'd never yell cop.

its message to the screaming activity that filled her mind.

The brain screamed, "Help, for God's sake, someone help me, please . . . please." The words buffeted futilely against the jammed mechanism of speech and her mouth was silent. The only voluntary muscles unaffected by the paralysis were those controlling her vision. Her pleading eyes roamed the familiar interior of the small house, searching for some clue of help or rescue.

"What's wrong with me?" The question pounded her mind. This had been no different than any other day for Mary Barnes. Widowed for the past three years she had been adequately provided for by insurance. She lived a simple, but full life in a small urban cottage. She had abounding energy for a woman in the mid-fifties. An accomplished caterer, she delighted in baking pastries, and basked in the glory of praise from her friends and neighbors as they sampled her creations.

She shifted her gaze to the clock on the mantel and saw that it was 3:45. Two hours she had lain there. She wondered if possibly this was death, but discounted it because of the movement of her eyes and the tingling in her hand. "What happened to me?" She searched her mind but could think of nothing unusual that had happened to have caused the paralysis.

The first indications came shortly after she had pushed open the window above the kitchen sink and gossiped with Betty, her nearest neighbor. A small lawn separated the two houses and they frequently talked in this window to window manner. They had chatted for a few minutes and then returned to their work. Mary stood near the sink, evaluating the crust of an apple pie, when the feeling of numbness started taking over her body.

The sensation produced a feeling of terror and she immediately thought of phoning the doctor. She turned, her legs felt like dead logs and she dragged them by shifting the weight on her hips. She reached the doorway to the living room and then, as she reached to steady herself, found that her arms would not respond. She collapsed and the paralysis quickly took over her entire body.

She lay on the floor, her left eye less than an inch above the polished hardwood surface. A thousand confused thoughts ran through her mind. What was this thing that had entered her body? Was she dying . . . or dead? Is this the way it feels to die? Her eyes sighted down the long strips of wood that interlaced to make the floor. The room from this angle looked like a huge auditorium with giant pillars of the legs of the table and chairs. There was dust under the table and near the leg of the far chair. She would have to clean and polish the floor when she got on

her feet—if she ever got on her feet again.

She tried to move her hand and thought that it was moving, but she couldn't see it and didn't know if it moved or not. The ticking of the old fashioned mantel clock became louder. The drip, drip, drip, of the water faucet was sometimes in unison with the clicking of the mantel piece and then the two would separate and cause an irratic and irritating pattern. She fought against listening to them but the sounds grew louder and engulfed her mind with their maddening pattern.

Suddenly her eyes shifted to the clock. The mailman . . . he would be by in a few minutes. He was always there a few minutes on either side of 4:00 o'clock. She waited. The minutes were longer now than they had been before. Eleven torturous minutes passed before she heard the sound on the front steps.

"Thank God," she thought. "He was here . . . but what good would that do?" The thought jammed into her mind. "He wouldn't look in the window, there was not reason for him too. Look inside, see me, help me!"

She tried to make a sound—a cry for help, but no matter how hard her brain and mind screamed out, the block was there and there was no sound.

The metallic click of the mailbox flopping closed was an overture to the steps scuffling down the three wooden stairs. Her eyes whelmed and tears collected and dropped on the floor. Her helplessness kindled a new spark of terror and she tried to bite her lip to keep from crying, but the facial muscles remained rigid and she felt more helpless than before.

Suddenly she heard her name called and recognized Betty's voice. Her eyes signaled a sense of relief. Betty would help her. The voice called again and she heard the sound of the window across the way being shut.

A minute later there was a knock on the back door. She prayed that Betty would come in. The knock sounded again—and then the voice of another neighbor was in the air.

"Betty, I haven't seen her around there for several hours, I don't think she's home."

"Thanks Marg," Betty's voice sounded so near. "It was nothing important." Footsteps scuffled down the steps. Mary tried to call out, but instead of the sound of her own voice she heard Betty's footsteps disappear in the direction of the other voice.

"Nothing important," Mary thought. "Why wasn't it important? Why didn't she open the door? Come back, Betty. Find me, and help me." She looked at the clock again and saw it was 4:28. "How long can I stay here like this before the numbness takes over the rest of me? I'll die—but if I have

to die, make it soon. I'll go mad lying here, not knowing if I'm alive or dead. My body feels like a log, I wonder if a log feels this? . . . seeing, hearing, absorbing sounds and sights like a sponge but not able to move, no one to help or find me, how long will I lay here? . . . when will they find the body of Mary Barnes? . . . Please—someone help me, or else let death take me away from this half-way place of living and not living."

Her mind ached with the pounding of innumerable thoughts that interwove themselves into a fabric of despair and hopelessness, and the blanket covered her mind and she fell into a deep sleep.

Her mind, once again free to make things as they should be, created visions of Mary running at full speed along the sandy beach of a placid lake. Her legs stretched wide in giant leaps of fantastic distances and heights. She stopped on the shore and happily picked up small pebbles and threw them into the still water. Her energy boundless, she went toward a large boulder and with supernatural strength lifted it without effort and tossed it far, far away.

It plunged into the water near the center of the lake. The loud and spectacular splash made her cry out with joy—but there was no sound, and the absence of it awakened her. Her eyes flicked open as she heard the last sounds of glass tinkling. It sounded like a window in the basement had been broken!

She listened intently, waiting for more sounds. Her ear, pressed to the floor, detected the unmistakable scraping of stealthy footsteps on the basement stairs. The click of the door lock was distinct as the knob was turned. The hinge creaked slightly as the door slowly opened. Darkness had closed in during her sleep and her eyes couldn't penetrate the blackness.

Suddenly the beam of a flashlight sliced through the dark room. It played on the floor and then on the walls and the tops of the tables. Behind the source of the light a dim and hazy reflected luminosity outlined the face and upper torso of a young boy.

She tried to make some utterance but no sound came. Frantically she tried to move the hand that had the tingling in it but it was no use. She watched the circle of light as it played about the room like a huge butterfly, moving, and then settling on various objects, bathing each in its own yellow light.

The gleam of a silver metal caught its attention. The source of the light moved closer to the metal. A hand invaded the yellow circle and closed over Mary's new watch. Then the light worked in her direction and her heart raced madly as it neared the doorway where she lay. Closer and closer it came, like a timid butterfly making

passes at an inviting flower. It swooped in a long arc and passed over the place where she knew her legs lay. It retraced the arc and steadied on the legs, and then moved up her body and finally stopped as it found her face.

A sweeping feeling of relief eased her mind and she stared into the light, her eyes pleading and thankful for the help that was here now. She tried again to speak but knew that what she wanted to say had to be said with her eyes. As she stared into the light the boy stared back, as though hypnotized.

Abruptly, he shook himself loose from the gaze. Terror filled his eyes as he fully realized where he was and what he had found. Five steps brought him to where Mary lay. He kneeled in front of her and dropped the flashlight on the floor in one motion. Fear was in his eyes as he closed his hand around her wrist. She felt warm! The light from the flashlight illuminated her face brightly and the boy pushed his face close to hers and looked into her eyes.

"He wants a signal," Mary thought. "Something to let him know I'm alive." She moved her eyes rapidly back and forth.

The boy gasped deeply, his eyes widened and a startled expression slammed across his face. He wheeled around, kicking the flashlight under the davenport in his haste. He started running in a half crouching position and by the time he reached the door he stood upright and clawed savagely at the lock. Mary heard him leap off the porch and land on the sidewalk, and then the pounding of his running feet drifted away in the distance.

Tears ran down Mary's face and formed a small pool on the floor below. Her prayers had been answered. At last she had been found . . . and help was on its way. Her mind relaxed and she fell into the merciful cloak of a deep sleep, knowing that she was going to be all right.

The next morning a young boy with seventh grade books under his arm, walked past the small cottage. The men dressed in white carried out the stretcher and slid it into the open door of the ambulance. The form of a body showed itself under the clean white sheet and the boy knew that the woman was dead.

A block away he whistled and a smile crossed his face as he felt the cool metal in his pocket. He would give the watch to Diane on her eleventh birthday. The old dame had croaked and couldn't yell cop.

He had been scared last night, but it was one of those one in a million things. Tonight would be better . . . . . the little house on Eight St. would be real easy.

POOR SHERM

Three things marked the turning points in Sherm's life: beautiful women, burnt liver, and murder.

BY
RUTH CHESSMAN

TWO MURDERS were done by two different murderers. The killers never met, and although one was never to receive man's punishment for his crime—a higher power took care of it with swifter justice—the one who lived carried both men's burden.

The first murder happened in Custer, Massachusetts, when Sherman Wyatt was twenty-two. *Sherman*. Nobody ever called him Sherm, and that about says it. He wasn't a man you could get close to, although there was nothing repulsive about him. On the contrary! He was a handsome young man, American style from his six feet of height to the rest of him, fine blue eyes and brown hair with

a slight wave. Men liked him, yet he had no close friends. Naturally many a girl had done her best but no girl ever had a prayer, not with his sister Sarah for a rival.

"We are very close," she'd say fondly. "Particularly since David died."

David Kenyon had taken a pretty desperate way out of being Sarah's husband by dying of pneumonia when his orphaned little brother-in-law was eight. He wouldn't have made much difference to Sherman dead or alive, though, since Sarah kept telling her husband, "You are too busy with your work to give time to Sherman." And she had often added, "After all, he is not your responsibility."

Thus David Kenyon did not act the father to little Sherman, much as he might have wanted to. Sarah, on the other hand, spent most of her time being a mother to the little brother who had been born so unexpectedly when she was twenty-five. After David died, leaving friendly memories and insurance, not to mention the income she already had from her parents, Sarah often remarked on how providential it was that she and David had had no children. Now she could devote herself single-mindedly to Sherman.

When Sherman graduated from Custer High he was pretty set on going ahead with the art that had begun to give him real pleasure, but Sarah jollied him out of it so skillfully that he didn't feel the pain at all. In fact, he thought it was all his idea when he turned what Sarah called sensible. Quite contentedly he registered at a university of Sarah's choice—within commuting distance, naturally, so he could continue to live at home. The September after he graduated he entered the law school at the same university.

"Naturally," as Sarah put it. Not only had David been a lawyer, but their own father too.

They were really a comfortable family, just the two of them. They had a pleasant little ranch-type house in a setting that had remained half-country simply because the development had not caught on. Every year or so a few lots sold, a few houses went up, but the progress was so slow that each street still ended abruptly in fields, streams or woods. Even this environment fitted into the unchanging pattern they lived by. Sherman knew exactly what to expect next, because Sarah always told him, and Sarah was always right.

And yet for a little space out of eternity one Indian summer afternoon in October it seemed as if an exciting new kind of life were just about to begin. This was on such a day as makes poets sing and artists dream. And Sherman was still an artist, because that part of a man never dies no matter how deliberately it is starved by indifference, nor made invisible by a

pretense that it does not exist.

This special afternoon Sarah was absent when he came home, although ordinarily she was there to give him her motherly welcome when he returned from classes. He began to idle through the house, nudged gently by a drive so long hidden he'd forgotten it was there. Without conscious plan he reached up to his closet shelf, in back of the hat box, and took out his sketch pad and charcoals. There was no secret about them—Sarah left them there each time she cleaned the closet. She seemed to know—who better?—that they were no threat to her plans for her brother. And yet today something in him stirred and reached out.

He left the house by the back door, and as if he had an assignation with destiny he walked beyond the limits of the faultless lawn to the pine woods which backed along the whole area.

There was a little clearing fifty feet from the edge. As a boy he'd come here a lot, but it was a long time since his last visit. He had a moment of panic at the idea that it might be overgrown, but then without warning he was on his own private carpet of pine needles. *I should come here more often,* he thought as a kind of rapture took hold of him. But Sarah hadn't even liked his visits here when he was a kid, how would she feel now? He made a quick deal with his conscience. *Not too often, just once in a while,* he promised himself.

He opened his box of charcoals and began to work. The straight tall trees rimmed about with scrubby bushes, the rare shaft of sunlight, the brightness here where he sat, the shadow there—and in the shadow, with only a scant motion of the leaves, a girl stood framed in the green. They froze for a moment, staring at each other, and then the girl said gaily, "Hi!"

He didn't know how to handle the unexpected, and fell back on a chilly, "Good afternoon."

After a quick look around she stepped full into the clearing. "My folks are back there, looking to buy land," she said. She spotted the sketchpad he had dropped behind him, and picked it up before he could stop her.

He wanted to snatch it back, but his wants had been kept under such exquisite control for so long that he hardly knew he had them. He did nothing except watch her with pretended boredom. She was a flashy girl, eighteen or so, her black hair worn in a pony tail, and with black eyes sparkling under black brows. She wore a low-cut peasant blouse and a wild-colored cotton skirt. Her jewelry was wild too—bright green loops dangled from her ears, and a necklace and bracelet of the same heavy-looking plastic ornamented the young throat and slim wrist. She shone against the dark trees like a tropical bird.

"Hey, this is good!" she said,

holding the sketch away from her as if to appreciate it more properly. "Very good."

He hardly breathed. Nobody except his high-school art teacher had ever praised his drawings. This girl's spontaneous opinion, however valueless her taste might be, was intoxicating.

"I'd like to do you, in colors," he said gratefully. "I'd call it *Bird*."

"Nobody ever said anything like that to me!" she said. Their eyes met. The moment, the vibrant girl, the repressed young man, all met and matched. They were locked in a first close embrace when Sarah's voice, calling his name, reached them. They moved apart quickly, but all the magic wasn't over. Even an almost instinctive obedience could not make him go the whole way and answer Sarah.

Did Sarah remember the clearing? Apparently not—she had stopped calling. After a full minute they turned to one another slowly—and at that moment his sister stepped into the clearing, dominating it from the second she set foot in it just as she had to dominate everything. She was tall, and wore her brown hair in a braid coronet. At this moment she seemed majestic to him, frighteningly so. He stole an apprehensive look at the girl who, to his amazement, seemed ready to laugh.

"So this is where I find you!" Sarah said. "A cheap rendezvous with a cheap girl."

"Sarah—please!" Sherman said, but his throat was so constricted the words sounded shrill. He glanced apologetically at the girl, whose expression had changed abruptly. Now she looked puzzled.

"I worried about you not being in the house," his sister proceeded accusingly. "But you—you couldn't even wait until I got home from marketing. All you cared about was hiding off here with some—some —!"

Sherman knew the girl was waiting for him to defend her. But that would mean defiance of Sarah. Although he was incapable of any lucidity on the subject, so that he could not even guess how he arrived at his conclusion, he knew irrevocably that defiance was impossible. Neither he nor his brother-in-law—nor anybody else, to his knowledge—had ever defied Sarah. Like many another before him who has said, "I have no choice," the real fact was simply that the existence of choice was something he had never dreamed of. The stillness began to thunder in his ears, and worse even than that was the motionless girl at his side, waiting, waiting.

Then she was waiting no longer. She walked to the edge of the clearing, the spot where she'd first materialized like a brilliant apparition, over her shoulder she called, "Goodbye, Sherman," and mockingly, "Poor Sherman!"

"Well, that's the last of her!"

Sarah said—prophetically, because he never saw the girl again, nor learned her name. On those rare, rare occasions when she came to mind he thought of her as Bird. A dream of Indian summer — and finis. "Come on, Sherman," Sarah added.

Sherman said mildly, "I'll be along in a minute."

Having won the war Sarah quite generously conceded this battle, and departed. Until she left he had no feelings beyond a vague discomfort, but the instant he was alone he was seized by a rage, a fury so passionate he couldn't be still. This was happening to him, who had never even known anger before! He caught sight of the sketch pad and snatched it up, only to rip it to shreds. He broke off a thick branch over his head, as easily as if it were a matchstick, and began to flail the trees with it until it too lay in shreds. For at least fifteen minutes he was a man possessed.

He had never in his memory resented Sarah, not even when he was a small child, yet even at his wildest he knew this must be an accumulation, that this pointless, objectless fury was the eruption of a volcano that had been boiling underneath for a lifetime. When the frenzy passed, quite as suddenly as it came, he dropped exhausted to the bed of pine needles and fell fast asleep at once.

It was full moonless night when he opened his eyes and started up, waiting to hear again whatever it was that had awakened him. It came to him again, a man's voice calling, "Sherman Wyatt?"

Another masculine voice said, "I told you he wouldn't be here. What would he be doing here?"

He called to them, and went to meet them guided by the beams from their flashlights.

"Police," one of them explained.

"Bad news, fella," the other said, as if he were trying to be kind—but there's no way to break the news gently, to tell a man kindly that his sister has been strangled.

"Lucky she was frying something at the time—liver it was," one of the men went on. "It began to smoke, see, and that Mrs. Innes next door thought it was a fire and ran over. She was the one found her."

Almost before the impact of the murder reached him, Sherman had a shocking idea. He had always detested liver, which Sarah insisted he eat once a week because it was so full of—what ever it was full of, he'd forgotten. A shocking, treacherous thought: *I'm glad the liver burned!*

He cleared the enormity out of his mind at once. Now came a new horror: *It wouldn't have happened if I'd just come back with her when she asked me to!* For a moment he flagellated himself with guilty regrets. And then suddenly that idea too was gone, and he couldn't remember what had been troubling

him. It had all come and gone while the police told him the whole story.

"Poor Sarah — murdered — " he said slowly, the words thickening up on him so that the two experienced officers got one on each side of him just as he folded.

It took an hour of so before Sherman was able to go through her things. Sarah had had very little jewelry, having been a woman who avoided such fripperies. All he could say was missing for sure were her diamond earrings, a gift from poor David Kenyon on their first wedding anniversary—a frivolous gesture David had apparently never felt an inclination to repeat.

Mrs. Innes had seen a disreputable looking man at the back door just about the time of the murder, but beyond that she knew nothing. When the earrings turned up in a pawnshop the next morning, a description of the Jeremiah Smyth who pawned them sounded enough like Mrs. Innes's disreputable-looking man to give them something to work on.

Even so they never caught up with the murderer because he, roaring drunk on the proceeds of the earrings, put himself completely out of their jurisdiction by walking across the wrong tracks at the wrong time. *One derelict, executed by a train.* He was never connected with Sarah Kenyon, and the case was accordingly never closed until one day when an extraordinary solution was handed to them on a platter.

Sherman, with a robustness of character rather surprising in so sheltered a young man, bore up well. He continued to live at home and went on with his law studies. This had all been planned for him by Sarah, so it required no independent thought. The income left by their parents now devolved upon him, and it was as if Sarah were still with him, paying his way, directing him.

It wasn't until he passed the bar four years later that he felt panic, but when it came it was complete. For days after getting the news that he was a full-fledged lawyer, he barely stirred. He felt as if he'd been pushed to the edge of a precipice. Below lay the black abyss of his uncharted future. Sarah had never gone beyond saying he was to be a lawyer. Had she meant him to set up for himself? Or was he to go into a large firm as one of its bright young men? Corporation law? Criminal law? He was close to collapse from the indecision when he received an impersonal little note from the family lawyer. It was a routine matter—he was to come in at his convenience any morning regarding a transfer of stock which Mr. Matthews wanted to discuss with him.

It was the first time in almost two weeks that he'd left the house, and he was grateful for the summons. Once more he was being told

what to do, even on so trivial a matter. It was as if he'd been led to a temporary rock to cling to.

Mr. Matthews was not in at the moment, would he mind waiting? He was only too glad to prolong the incident, because at the end of it he could see only the same terrifying nothingness. It was very comfortable to chat with Mr. Matthews' secretary, Ellen Pagett, whom he'd come to know over the years, although until today he had never really looked at her.

Now, however, he found to his surprise that she was in some vague way a great deal like Sarah. Actually, although Ellen was six years older than Sherman, she did not at all look like his sister, being a trim little blond with cold grey eyes. However, basically he was right. In other more important ways she was so exactly like Sarah that he began to feel at ease for the first time in years.

For instance at noon Ellen said, "I'm sure Mr. Matthews will be in at any minute, so don't give up hope. He has to be back so I can go out to eat. Then if you like I'll show you a good place so you can have lunch."

Sherman thought it a perfect idea, since it was presented ready made. When Mr. Matthews returned as Ellen had predicted, Sherman signed for the transfer and went off lightheadedly with Ellen. Naturally they had their lunch together. He told her something of his predicament regarding the future, and Ellen looked wise and said, "What a remarkable coincidence! Mr. Matthews is looking for someone just like you, he's so rushed."

Sherman returned to the office with her and waited outside while she spoke to Mr. Matthews privately. He was not concerned about the results. A woman had always smoothed his way for him in the past, why not now?

Ellen did get him the job and Sherman, being really bright, did well from the start. At work and outside, Ellen was his constant companion. At the end of a year she suggested that he ask to have an unused portion of the front office partitioned off for his use. Mr. Matthews thought it a sensible idea. The privacy of an office gave Sherman a feeling of importance, and his work got even better. At the end of another year he was appearing in court on his own occasionally, and Ellen suggested that he needed a secretary. Mr. Matthews quite agreed, so Ellen found him Mrs. Murphy, a pleasant, middle-aged woman who knew her business. Having thus made him into a practicing lawyer with his own office and secretary, Ellen told him it was time he began to think of marriage.

"We can't go on like this forever," she pointed out.

As usual she was right, Sherman agreed. It wasn't very romantic, but he was getting exactly what he

wanted, an energetic woman who could plan ahead and tell him what his life was going to be like.

Ellen continued to work after their simple wedding. She decided his house was a luxury for the present, so she leased it at an excellent rental and he moved into her adequate, if somewhat prim, furnished apartment.

Every time Ellen revealed a new side, it just proved her to be more like Sarah. She even insisted they have liver once a week because of the valuable things it contained. When he made one of his rare protests, she too could recite all liver's vitamins and so forth, as glibly as Sarah.

"All right, all right," he conceded amiably, "I'll eat it, just don't ask me to memorize it."

Less than a year after their marriage Mr. Matthews made Sherman a junior partner. Ellen decided the time had come to quit work. Mrs. Murphy took her place, for of course Mr. Matthews must have the more experienced secretary, and a new one was hired for Sherman.

Now if Ellen had been there, Harriet Baker would never have been hired. Mrs. Murphy, good soul, hardly noticed the girl's beauty, being intent only on her references, so one morning Sherman came into his office to find Harriet demurely seated near his desk.

She was a stunning redhead, a real redhead with real green eyes, and her clear bright coloring reached the artist in him. For a moment he stood stock still, staring. For a moment she stared back, innocently expectant, because his silence was such a speaking one. But it was all perfectly smooth and correct in a few minutes. Harriet knew proper office decorum and Sherman promptly accepted her as just his secretary, in the convenient way he had of sinking his feelings into oblivion without even knowing he was doing it.

From then on, though, he did a great deal of cheerful whistling, bought himself a couple of lively ties, and looked forward with enthusiasm to each day's work. He also developed an exciting new approach to his work, an impetuousness—it was the way a man might act if he were freshly in love and full of derring-do to impress his lady. But if this were really the case with Sherman, he would be the last to know it.

Harriet was discreetly worshipful, but only to the exact degree the perfect secretary ought to be. Mr. Matthews, a pedestrian lawyer at best, began to regard Sherman with a mixture of awe and alarm—as if he were an irradiated Clarence Darrow. To Sherman, whistling a love song, the world looked sweet.

As if to fill his cup to running over, one fine spring day Ellen announced that since their tenant's lease was up, she had decided it was a good time for them to

move into the house themselves.

"It should take six months to have the house renovated and furnished enough for us to move in. I know you'll be glad I sold the old furniture to the tenants," Ellen said.

This was precisely the ordered planning Sherman loved. The tenants moved out, and Ellen began picking color schemes. At one point Sherman said, "How are you doing with the house, Ellen? I'm quite a hand with colors, you know."

"Are you, dear?" she asked absently.

He tried again. "I mean—I'd like to see what you're doing—I may be able to contribute some ideas."

"Yes, dear," she said. He felt like a fool—an angry fool, for a minute or so, but his anger passed soon enough into the limbo of all his other emotions, and it was as if it had never been.

Ellen never came to the office once she quit. "I don't approve of interfering wives," she would say, and he could have sworn he heard Sarah in her voice.

Besides, she was much too busy to take the time to visit his office. She was at furniture houses, drapery houses, rug houses, all day long.

As she had predicted, in about six months Ellen decided the time had come to move into the house. Sherman had not been back to it since the tenants left, but he knew it would now be perfect because Ellen would settle for nothing less. When he left work he went to the house that had been home to him for most of his life, parked his car where he always had, at the foot of the little rise which the house topped. Sarah's car used to have priority for the garage, and sure enough there was Ellen's, already snugly parked inside.

Sherman let himself in with the key Ellen had efficiently handed him as he left for work that morning. By habit he hung his jacket in the front hall closet. The living room had been papered in a white brocaded pattern that looked like silk, and the furniture sat on the silver grey rug in an untouchable state. He walked slowly to the kitchen, where Ellen stood at the stove, and they exchanged their customary pecks. He complimented her on the decor of the house, and she replied, "Thank you, dear."

The room that had been his was now to be the den, and had been painted the latest green. He opened the closet door and without knowing why reached far back on the shelf. There were no sketch pad and charcoals, of course, and he laughed at himself for the impulse. By a freak accident the shelfboard caught in his shirt and came down, ripping the sleeve and laying open a deep gash along the inside of his arm.

After the first burning tear there was no pain and little blood, but the wound itself was ugly and gap-

ing, with bits of green paint caught in it. He had to be etherized while the wound was cleaned and stitched. In the morning he felt so tired he decided to stay home.

"I'm going to court tomorrow," he told Ellen, "but fortunately I hadn't a thing on for today."

Ellen frowned. "But the day before you go to court you always work on your brief," she said. She spent a thoughtful moment. "I had planned to see about the hangings today. Kaufmans are expecting some new fabrics—"

Sherman felt he could safely leave the problem in Ellen's hand, and typically enough she worked it out by calling Mrs. Murphy and asking that either she or that new girl deliver the brief by cab.

Thus by a series of very ordinary events came about a very extraordinary situation. At ten o'clock on a beautiful fall morning, Harriet and he met on the front lawn where he had gone when he heard her cab. He took the folder from her and dropped it on the mail table in the front hall, saying, "It's too pleasant for either of us to hurry back to work.

Harriet smiled devoted agreement. They walked about, and he pointed out the trees he had watched his sister plant when he was a child. "They grew up with me," he concluded sentimentally.

"What a wonderful place for a boy to grow up!" Harriet exclaimed.

He gave a reminiscent chuckle and suddenly, for the first time since—for the first time in many years he remembered the clearing.

"I even had a little hideout," he said, and by unspokn agreement they walked to it, he pushing aside the overgrown shrubs with his good arm.

It hadn't changed. It was like standing in a cathedral with the morning sun just barely reaching them.

"I wish I had my charcoals!" he said, half to himself.

"Oh—I knew it!" Harriet exclaimed. "You are so imaginative in your work, you could have been a great artist, I'm sure of it."

As it had once overwhelmed him before in this very spot, gratitude shook him. "I used to think I'd make it my life," he said unevenly, remembering it with a shock, with regret, with—with feelings he kept pushing back where they came from.

"But it's never too late," Harriet protested.

No, it wasn't! He was still a young man. He could make a new life—and Harriet would have to part of it, naturally. His one good arm held her, and she met his kiss yearningly. It was a pledge. The ideas rushed at him in a riot. Divorce—! Ellen wouldn't mind—! Maternal, that's how she felt—! He could tell the difference now—! Harriet—!

They didn't say a word, yet he

could sense they were in full agreement. Even when they started back out of the clearing it was done so naturally, just as if they had actually said out loud, now is not the time, this is not the place. He led the way with confidence, and came out onto the lawn just ahead of Harriet.

Sauntering to meet him was Ellen, who explained she had just returned, and added, "I wondered where you'd gone to."

For a moment he forgot all about Harriet, he was so astonished to see how prim and old-maidish Ellen really was! He'd simply never looked at her before!

Harriet must have stepped out of the trees just then, because Ellen's sharp eyes went past him, then darted to his face again. He didn't stir, but he knew why she was looking at him like that. Neither he nor Harriet had thought to remove traces of her lipstick.

"So this is Miss Baker," Ellen said, with icy contempt. "So this is how the days go at the office—"

She's just like Sarah, Sherman thought calmly, remembering Bird. He cleared his throat. "You quite misunderstand—" he began.

"I don't think so," Ellen said drily. She looked past him again at Harriet. "You are discharged, Miss Baker. Don't bother going back to the office."

There was no sound from Harriet. Sherman knew she was waiting for him to defend her as once before another girl had waited. He wanted to do it this time. He wanted to take Harriet's hand firmly in his and stalk boldly by Ellen. Or he wanted to shatter Ellen with a word. Or—but still, he was a reasonable man, he told himself, cringing from such aggressive behavior. He could see how it must look from Ellen's point of view—from anyone's point of view, really. He was a married man, he had no right, the facts were all against him, what could a guilty man do or say?

"Go into the house and phone for a cab," Ellen directed Harriet. "Then wait on the sidewalk till it comes. The office will send you the fare."

"I'd rather walk all day than set foot in your house," Harriet choked, and ran by them, around the house.

"Well, now," Ellen said briskly, "let's go in. While I fix lunch you can wash that girl's lipstick off your face."

One-handedly Sherman washed his face. He was too ashamed to look in the mirror. He had acted shabbily! He'd deserted Bird—no, Harriet, he'd deserted her, there were no words to describe how despicably he'd acted.

He listened bleakly to the sounds Ellen made in the kitchen. The faintly nauseating smell of frying liver reached him. "You need extra strength," she had told him that morning. "A nice piece of liver will do it for you."

He went to the kitchen door and stared inside. The liver smell was stronger. A rage such as he had known only once before took hold of him. Terrified, he tried to control it before it went too far, but in a flash he was berserk and murderous, and it was too late.

The liver was smoking and charred by the time his rage ebbed, by the time he took his hands from her throat. The stitches on his arm must have broken, because blood began to show on his bandage. He leaned weakly against the refrigerator, then dropped heavily to his knees beside Ellen.

She was quite dead. He'd known that, of course. Even in his paroxysm he'd known that he wouldn't let go of her throat until he was sure she was dead.

When he could, he staggered to his feet. He was reeling dizzily when he reached the phone and dialed the police.

"I want to report a murder," he said, and then groped through the fog in his mind, seeking the words he knew were there, finding them, saying them, "I've just killed my sister."

It was an easy one for the police. He was executed for killing Ellen, of course, but they were able to close the case on Sarah too. Nobody, least of all Sherman, ever thought to question his confession, to ask which part of it was his will, and which his deed.

Stanley came at me on all fours. His eyes were wild and crazy. A little river of spit ran down his chin.

A Friend Of Stanley's

BY GUY CROSBY

MA WARNED me I'd get in trouble hanging around with Stanley Carstairs all the time and she was sure right. It wasn't that I didn't believe her, because most always everything worked out like she said it would, but there wasn't nobody else for me to bum around with.

Stanley was about as old as me, sixteen, and smart as anything. He was a senior in high school. I don't go to school no more. After I spent three years in the sixth grade, Ma took me out. She said there weren't no use wasting the taxpayers money when I didn't have the head for book stuff.

It was kind of funny at that. Stanley being so small and smart the fellows didn't want nothing to do with him, and always laughing when I was around because I was

so big and dumb. I guess you have to stand in the middle some place to fit in. Anyway, that was the reason me and Stanley got to hanging around with each other all the time after school.

Stanley lived on the other side of town with his grandma, his folks having been killed in a car wreck about five years ago. I'd go over there and wait for him to get out of school and then we'd walk out on one of the back roads leading out of town. That's all we'd ever do. Just walk and Stanley would talk a lot. About books and all the things he was going to do when he'd graduate. I'd listen real close, he made it sound so good, and think maybe something like that would happen to me.

But most of the time he'd talk about how dumb everybody was and how he could outsmart anybody in the whole town if only he put his mind to it.

That's what started all the trouble, I guess. He finally put his mind to it. Maybe he never would have if it hadn't been for Sally Newman.

I could tell something was wrong with Stanley that afternoon he came home from school. Most times we would horse around a little wrestling and I'd pin him easy, and he'd laugh and say I had all the muscle and he had all the brains. He'd say it was too bad our folks hadn't got together but I don't see what good that would have done.

One time I told him that and he laughed fit to bust. After that I'd laugh along with him like I understood what he meant but I never did.

Well, this day he didn't say nothing to me, but just started out walking so fast I almost had to run to keep up with him. I could always tell when Stanley was plenty mad. His face got all red and his eyes were real bright and shiny. He picked up a stick and went along slashing it at all the bushes and trees and everything he passed. I followed along not saying anything on account of I could see he was so mad he wouldn't of heard me anyway.

He cut off the road after awhile and followed a path through the woods to a clearing on top of the mountain. It was sure nice and peaceful up there with the trees and the soft smells of early summer. It made you feel alive and good to be a part of it.

I was going to tell Stanley that when he threw himself face down on the ground and began to cry. It was an awful sound among all that quiet that sobbing coming from deep inside him. His whole body shook and his fingers worked in and out of the soft moss.

I'd never heard Stanley cry before. It was a terrible thing to lay there and listen to and not being able to do anything to help your friend.

After a long time he rolled over

and sat up. He never said nothing. Just sat there staring off in space. His eyes were red-rimmed and narrow and mean.

"Nothing but a slut," he hissed. "A dumb, stupid slut."

It was more like he was talking to himself.

"I'll fix her," he said. "You can just bet I'll fix her real good."

It made the flesh crawl up my back, the way he talked in that tight, mean voice. I had to ask him twice who he was going to fix. The first time he said her name he sounded like he was going to throw up.

After I thought a little, I remembered seeing her around town, pretty as a bird, and all the fellows hanging around laughing and kidding and trying to feel her when they thought nobody was looking. She had bright red hair and her mouth was always laughing.

I couldn't imagine what Stanley had against a girl as pretty as that.

"What did she do?" I asked.

Stanley's chin trembled so I thought he was going to bust out crying again. He had to swallow a couple of times before he could tell me. When he did, I could see right away why he got so mad.

It seemed that during the lunch hour every day, Stanley noticed that Sally Newman disappeared with some boy up in the woods behind the school. Not the same fellow either, but just about a different one every day.

One day he hung around and followed Sally and this guy up into the hills. He was real quiet and careful and sneaked up on them in a little clearing. Stanley said they were laying there together, kissing and loving and doing something I never even heard of.

They never did know he was watching them but after that he began hanging around Sally like the other fellows. He never did make any headway though till one day he got her alone and told her what he'd seen. He told her if she didn't go up in the hills with him he'd turn her in to the principal. She thought about it awhile and promised him if he would keep his mouth shut she would go with him.

Stanley got so worked up thinking about it that he couldn't even eat breakfast. At noon time Sally met him behind the gym and they sneaked up in the hills together. They got up there where Stanley had seen her with this other guy and she began kissing him and stuff like that and pretty soon he had his pants down around his ankles.

He had a hard time telling me this next part but he finally did.

With his pants down like that, all at once Sally began to laugh like everything, and about twenty fellows jumped up from where they were hiding in the bushes and they all began laughing fit to kill. Stanley was blushing and sick and fighting to get his pants up and

all the fellows were shoving him around and hollering and laughing and calling him 'bird-legs' and 'Stanley the Stripper.'

He was mad and embarrassed all right, but what really got him was Sally giggling and telling him it took more than a boy to do a man's job. That's when he decided to fix her. He was so ashamed he didn't even go back to school that afternoon.

I guess I shouldn't have laughed at him. Stanley being my only friend and feeling so bad and everything. I couldn't help it though. Picturing old Stanley standing there with his pants down and his mouth open, I busted out laughing so hard tears came to my eyes. I bet he was sure surprised.

Stanley's hand went in and out of his pocket like a snake and all at once the sun was flashing off the long blade of a knife. He came at me on all fours stumbling, crawling. His eyes were wild and crazy; his mouth twitching. A little river of spit ran down his chin.

I don't think fast like Stanley. I just lay there dumb like and watched him come at me. His hand moved up and down with the knife aimed right at my chest. I never rolled over so fast in all my life. The knife slid into the ground silent and soft right where I'd been lying.

I grabbed him and we wrestled around, kicking up the dirt and pine needles trying to get hold of that knife. Stanley was my friend and all but I could see he wasn't fooling. He was sure tough to hold and that long sharp blade kept flickering in and out between us like lightning. It's a wonder somebody didn't get hurt.

Finally I got the knife away from him and he just sat there with the tears running down his cheeks.

I tried to tell him I was sorry about laughing but he wouldn't listen. I began fooling with the knife and it was sure a good one. You just pressed a button and that big blade popped right out. I wished I had one like it.

When Stanley stopped crying, I gave him back the knife and we walked back to town. He never said a word all the way home. His face was set and hard. When I left him he said. "Nobody will ever laugh at me again. Nobody."

He sounded like he meant it.

Stanley must have skipped school that day because he came by the house for me at about eleven o'clock. He came sneaking up to the back door so Ma wouldn't see him and motioned me outside. He was acting strange with his finger to his lips and motioning for me to follow him. I figured this was a new game and I'd play along with him just as long as he wasn't mad no more. Stanley was the only friend I had.

Down by the barn I caught up with him.

"Where're we going?" I asked.

Stanley laughed. It wasn't nice to hear. He kept blinking his eyes like there was something in them.

"Come on," he said. "I'm going to show you what happens to people who laugh at me."

I guess I shouldn't have gone. But Stanley was acting so funny and promising to show me something I thought this was his way of making up.

We skirted the edge of town, dodging in and out behind trees and barns like nobody should see us until we came out behind the high school gym. Stanley led the way up a path behind the gym for about a quarter mile till we came to a clearing.

"Here we are," Stanley said.

I looked around. I was awful disappointed. There was nothing there but some trees and a little meadow. Stanley must have seen it on my face.

"Just wait," he said softly. "Wait and see."

He took two pillowcases out from under his shirt and gave one to me. He was beginning to get pretty excited.

"Put it on," he said. "Over your head."

I laid my cap on the ground and pulled the pillowcase over my head. There were two holes cut in it so I could see. Stanley had his on too and I would hardly know him.

Then I began to get excited too about this swell game. I could hardly wait for somebody to come up the path so we could jump out and scare them half to death. We waited for a long time and nobody came and I began to get restless. I can't keep my mind on one thing very long like Stanley.

"Let's go over the other side of the hill," I said, "and see if we can't jump a rabbit."

Stanley gave that funny, ugly laugh again. "This is better than jumping rabbits," he said. He motioned me over behind a bush. "In a little while a fellow and a girl will come up here. You grab him and hold him. I'll take the girl."

"How do you know they'll come?"

"They'll come," he said.

It happened just like Stanley said it would. It made me real proud to have a friend like Stanley who could figure out in advance how something would happen.

They came up the path together, giggling and whispering and holding hands. I never saw the boy before. The girl was Sally Newman. They came to the edge of the clearing and sat down and he put his arm around her. They were talking so low I couldn't hear them.

He was kissing her on the mouth and on the neck and his hand was picking at the buttons on her blouse. My heart was pounding in my chest and my ears roared like a summer storm.

He had her blouse open and was straining at her brassiere and my

throat was swollen shut. I didn't think my legs would hold me up anymore they were shaking so.

"Now!" Stanley yelled and busted out of his hiding place.

I came flying out of the bushes and jumped on the fellow before he even knew what hit him. We rolled over and over on the ground and I pinned him down with my knees grinding in his biceps. He looked so scared I had to laugh under the pillowcase.

Everything happened so fast I lost track of Stanley. The fellow I was kneeling on whimpered a little but didn't fight. Then I saw Stanley. He had the girl pinned down right where she had been laying. The point of his knife was touching her throat. I tried to tell him to be careful that he would hurt her, but my throat was so dry nothing came out.

One thing I'll say for Sally though. She wasn't scared. If she was she didn't show it. She just kept watching Stanley warily, waiting, hardly breathing.

"Lay still," he said, "and you won't get hurt."

His voice sounded loud and high and squeaky in the silence of the woods. There wasn't another sound. Just four people breathing and nothing else. It was real scary.

Stanley's hand moved and the brassiere was gone. Her breasts burst forth in the sunlight white and full and free. He reached down and raised her skirt.

It didn't take long what Stanley did. Sally never pleaded or begged or said anything. There was just that awful silence of trees listening and Stanley's short, harsh breathing.

When it was over, she just lay there. She didn't try to run or cover herself up or anything. She just lay there and began to laugh. She laughed and laughed.

"Stop it!" Stanley screamed. "Stop it! Stop it!"

"You rabbit," she said scornfully. "You damned rabbit."

She lifted up the hood then and spit right in Stanley's face.

The knife moved so fast I couldn't follow it. One minute she was laying there laughing at Stanley and then she gave a little groan and lay still. Bright red welled out of her throat and ran like a river between her breasts and down the still whiteness of her stomach.

I got so scared I forgot to hold onto the fellow I was kneeling on and he wiggled right out from under me. His face was white and frightened and he ran at Stanley, arms outstretched. Stanley leaped up like a cat and just when this guy was going to grab him, Stanley stepped inside his arms and sunk the knife right into his chest.

He went down on his knees slowly, trying to pull the knife out of his chest. A big circle of red spread out over the front of his shirt.

He kept saying, "Oh, God! Oh,

God! Oh, God!," over and over till he fell forward on his face and died.

Stanley pulled the knife out and wiped it on the pillowcase.

"We can throw them away," he said. "I stole them."

I laid mine over her face. It didn't seem right somehow, her laying there like that half naked, staring up at the sky.

"You killed them," I said.

"You're damn right I did. That's what happens to anybody that laughs at me." His eyes were small and funny. "Here," he said. "You can have the knife." He slipped it in my pocket.

"You mean for keeps?"

He nodded. A muscle in his cheek twitched.

"For keeps," he said smiling. "Let's get the hell out of here."

I looked back once at the two of them laying there in the long shadows. Even though Stanley gave me the knife, I knew we'd done something bad. My head ached something fierce and my stomach was sick.

Lucky Ma wasn't home when I got there. She would've known right away something was wrong and kept after me till I told her all about it. Then she'd get awful mad, me doing something bad like that, and being with Stanley and all. She could never understand about Stanley, how he was my best friend and everything.

All I could do was think about what happened. My head hurt worse than ever. There was something I knew I should remember but the more I tried to think, the more my head hurt.

It must have been important though because I wanted to remember so hard.

I went upstairs and lay on the bed for a long time with the covers pulled up over my head. I thought if I laid there long enough maybe all those things in my head would go away. Like they were a bad dream or something.

But nothing went away. It just kept getting more mixed up and I couldn't remember what I was supposed to. Even under the covers I could see the two of them lying there in the sun and shadows.

My head pounded so I thought I'd cry.

Finally I got up and went in the closet and sat down on the floor behind all the clothes. I took the knife out of my pocket and began to pitch it into the floor.

It went in thud, thud, thud. Then I had to stop because it sounded just like when Stanley stuck it in that fellow's chest.

The door closed downstairs and Ma was home. She was in the kitchen getting supper and twice she went to the back door and hollered for me. I never answered. She came upstairs and looked in my room, then went away sort of talking to herself.

When she left, I came out of the

closet and lay down on the bed, trying to remember. The headache never went away—never in all that time.

It got dark outside and the moon came up bright and full. Long, black shadows crawled across the floor. I heard Ma go out calling me. I was never so scared in all my life, laying there all alone, watching those shadows, and trying to remember through all that pounding in my head.

That's when I heard the first car drive up. Then there was another and another until all the night was full of the sound of cars grinding up the hill and stopping in front of our house.

I looked out the window and there were cars all over the street, even parked on our front lawn. Men kept getting out of the cars and they all had lanterns and flashlights and rifles. Every single one of those men had a rifle.

At first I thought they were going coon hunting like they do sometimes at night because some of them even brought their dogs. Then I knew better. I thought it out right there.

They weren't hunting for coons.

They were hunting for me.

And I remembered what I'd been trying to think of all afternoon. How come they happened to be there. Why they came for me. When Stanley gave me that pillowcase to put on, I took off my cap and dropped it right there on the ground. Right where those bodies were.

My name was sewed inside the cap so I'd be sure to get it back. I was always forgetting and leaving it someplace.

There must have been a hundred men down there all beating and kicking on the front door and hollering for me to come out. Nobody was at the side of the house. I eased out the window, slid part way down the drain pipe and dropped the rest of the way to the ground.

I ran through the night crouched over so they couldn't see me and after awhile I didn't hear the noise of the men and dogs anymore.

The only sound in all that dark was my feet hitting the ground and the long shadow of the moon chasing me in and out of the opening of the trees. That and the breath roaring in my throat. I ran right for Stanley's house. I didn't have no other place to go.

Stanley was all alone when I got there. We sat down together on the porch till I got my breath. My throat was all dry and raw from all that running. Stanley knew right away something was up but he didn't say anything.

"They came for me," I told him.

"Who did?" he asked. He looked at me kind of cold and curious. "Who came for you?"

"A lot of men—and dogs."

He gave a funny laugh. "Men and dogs," he said. "What for? What did you do?"

It didn't seem right somehow for Stanley to be forgetting so soon. Usually it was me that forgot. Stanley was my friend. He remembered everything for me.

"You remember, Stanley," I pleaded. "For what we did this afternoon."

He looked me right straight in the eyes. "I don't know what you did this afternoon," he said bluntly, "but I was home with my grandmother all day. I can prove it."

It was just like a bomb went off in my brain. I tried hard to think about what Stanley had said. My head hurt so bad I kept pounding it with my fist. Along the edge of the woods there were lights bobbing and weaving following the path I had come. Dogs were baying deep and mean and men kept shouting to each other.

I closed my eyes real tight and thought maybe everything would go away. But it didn't and when I opened them, the men and dogs were getting awful close. I felt terrible. Stanley hadn't been with me at all when I did that bad thing. He was home all day and he could prove it. He was my best friend and I almost got him mixed up in all my trouble.

"If you did something wrong," he said, "you'd better give yourself up."

His voice was real calm and reasonable. I guess I would have given up if it hadn't been for all that noise with the dogs barking and the men yelling. I was so mixed up my head felt like it was going to come off. They were so close I could see them clear in the moonlight.

Stanley shouldn't have done what he did then. Being my friend and all I didn't expect it from him. No more than I would've done something like that to him.

He jumped up real excited like, pinned my arms to my sides and began yelling at the top of his voice.

"Over here," he hollered right in my ear. "I got him over here on the porch."

You never heard so much fury in all your life. Men running and shouting, dogs barking and Stanley and me wrestling all over the front porch. And all the time he kept screeching, "I got him! I got him!"

I like never to get away. That Stanley was getting stronger all the time from all that walking and horsing around we did.

They were almost on top of me when I made it off the porch and around the house. I headed for the hills as hard as I could run. As fast as I was going though, I could still hear Stanley shouting, "Around the house. He went around the house."

No matter what Stanley done, I would never have given him away like that.

It seemed like I ran all night. The wind pushed at my face, stung my eyes. And I kept running and

bumping into things and falling down and getting up and running again. I ran till I couldn't see, till I couldn't breathe. My legs gave out and I fell down and lay there all alone in the woods in the dark.

I just lay there and wished I'd given myself up like Stanley said, but I knew it was too late now. They would be coming for me again—the men and the dogs—and I couldn't run anymore.

I lay there and listened. Listened to the hollow sound of the wind in the trees—to nothing. I listened and waited. Waited for the men and the dogs.

Finally, when nobody came, I sat up and took the knife out of my pocket and started throwing it into the ground. It didn't make a sound sliding into the dirt. I'd flip it and it would stick in the ground. Then I'd feel around till I found it and flip it again. I don't know how long I sat there throwing that knife before it came to me.

But all at once I knew.

Just all of a sudden the thought was there on top of all that pain in my head. Stanley was my friend and he had lied to me.

Stanley must have been with me this afternoon.

He had given me the knife.

I circled back through the woods slow and quiet. There wasn't any reason to hurry anymore. It took a long time to work my way back to Stanley's house. I made it though without anybody seeing me.

I waited there behind a bush, looking at the house dark and empty, making sure nobody was around before I eased up on the porch.

The back door was open like everybody leaves them.

I climbed the stairs to Stanley's room soft and quiet, putting each foot down carefully so as not to make any noise. It was real still there except for Stanley's grandma snoring. My head had stopped hurting and I don't ever remember when I could think so good. Everything came to me sharp and clear and I knew just what I had to do.

There was a lot to think about while I waited for Stanley. I remembered all the things we did and all the good times after school. It was nice just sitting there remembering. But it was funny how thinking about all those nice things could make me feel so sad. Maybe because I felt inside that they could never happen again.

Toward morning I heard the men coming back. I could see them through the window. Their voices were low and tired. Stanley was with them. He had been out helping them look for me. The moon was almost dead in the west, just above the tops of the trees.

One of the men said, "We'll stick around in case he comes back. You the only friend he's got?"

"I guess I am," Stanley said.

He was too.

Stanley came in real noisy and

cheerful, whistling to himself like he didn't have a care in the world. When he got in the room, I stepped out from behind the door and closed it quietly. He didn't see me till he turned on the light. His eyes got big and wide and the blood drained out of his face. I didn't say a word.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. His voice didn't belong to him.

"You shouldn't have told them, Stanley."

His eyes kept sliding around the room but there was no way past me to the door.

"There are men all around the house," he said. "All I've got to do is holler and they'll come running. They'll shoot you down like a dog."

"You do that, Stanley," I said. "You just holler."

He kept backing up, putting one foot behind the other, real slow and careful. I followed him step for step. The breath whistled through his teeth.

"You done a bad thing, Stanley," I said, "and tried to blame it on me."

His eyes, wide and scared, never left mine. He backed against the wall, pressing tight against it. His fingers crawled up the wall like tiny legs till his arms were stretched out from his sides.

"You're crazy," he said. "You did it. I wasn't even with you. I can prove it."

"Friends shouldn't lie to each other," I said.

I took the knife out of my pocket and showed it to him. His face came apart before my eyes. Tears ran down his cheeks and he wasn't even crying.

I pressed the button and that big blade jumped out all bright and shiny. I put the point against Stanley's throat like he did with the girl. A single drop of blood appeared.

His eyes turned right back in his head and he started to scream worse than anything I ever heard in my life. The sound went through the night like a flash of lightning.

"I come to return your knife, Stanley," I said, and moved the blade from left to right across his throat.

The scream stopped in midair but there were echoes of it still ringing in the house. Stanley slid down the wall to the floor and died right there at my feet.

The echo hadn't even died away when the house was full of men pouring in the front door. They came up the stairs so fast and hard the walls shook.

I dropped from the upstairs window and was running as soon as I hit the ground. I was running towards the moon and the stars and I felt light and free. Someone turned on a car's headlights and the white glare blinded me but it felt warm and good like the sun.

The knife was still in my hand dripping blood and I ran as hard as I could towards the cars and the men. It was like running in a dream, smooth and easy and effortless.

My head felt good and clear because I didn't have to think anymore. I knew I could run forever —for the rest of my life.

All around me were the lights and men shouting. I began to laugh because I knew they could never catch me. And above the noise was this cracking sound like a whip and little red fireflies winked on and off.

Then the moon and the stars and the lights got all mixed up and turned over and over until everything was gone.

Everything was gone—the moon, the stars, the fireflies. It was dark and quiet and peaceful.

A Novelette

BY FLETCHER FLORA

LOOSE ENDS

Faith Salem was a willowy honey-blonde with some good reasons for wanting to know what had happened to her fiance's wife.

A WOMAN wanted to see me about a job. Her name, she said, was Faith Salem. She lived, she said, in a certain apartment in a certain apartment building, and she told me the number of the apartment and the floor it was on and the name and the address of the building it was in. She said she wanted me to come there and see her at three o'clock that afternoon, the same day she called on the telephone, and I went and saw her, and it was three o'clock when I got there.

The door was opened by a maid

with a face like half a walnut. You may think it's impossible for a face to look like half a walnut, and I suppose it is, if you want to be literal, but half a walnut is, nevertheless, all I can think of as a comparison when I think of the face of this maid. She wasn't young, and she probably wasn't old. She was, as they say, an indeterminate age. Her eyes smiled, but not her lips, and she nodded her head three times as if she had checked me swiftly on three salient points and was satisfied on every one. This gave me confidence.

"I'm Percy Hand," I said. "I have an appointment with Miss Salem."

"This way," she said.

Following her out of a vestibule, I waded through a couple acres of thick wood pile in crossing two wide rooms, and then I crossed, in a third room, another acre of black and white tile that made me feel, by contrast, as if I were taking steps a yard high, and finally I got out onto a terrace in the sunlight, and Faith Salem got up off her stomach and faced me. She had been lying on a soft pad covered with bright yellow material that might have been silk or nylon or something, and she was wearing in a couple of places a very little bit of more material that was just as shining and soft and might have been the same kind, except that it was white instead of yellow. Sunbathing was what she was doing, and I was glad. Her skin was firm and golden brown, and it gave the impression of consistency all over, and I was willing to bet that the little bit of white in a couple of places was only a concession to present company. Nine times out of ten, when someone tries to describe a woman who is fairly tall and has a slim and pliant and beautiful body, he will say that she is willowy, and that's what I say. I say that Faith Salem was willowy. I also say that her hair was almost the identical color of the rest of her, and this seemed somehow too perfect to have been accomplished deliberately by design, but it may have been. You had to look at her face for a long time before you became aware that she was certainly a number of years older than you'd thought at first she was.

"Mr. Hand has arrived, Miss Faith," the maid said.

"Thank you. Maria," Faith Salem said.

I stepped twice, and she stepped twice, and we met and shook hands. Her grip was firm. I liked the way her fingers took hold of my fingers and held them and were in no hurry to drop them.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Hand," she said. "You must excuse me for receiving you this way, but the sun is on this terrace for only a short while while each afternoon, and I didn't want to miss any of it."

"I'd have been sorry to have missed it myself," I said.

She smiled gravely, taking my

meaning, and then released my fingers and walked over to a yellow chaise lounge on which a white hip-length coat had been left lying. She put on the coat and moved to a wrought iron and glass table where there was a single tall tumbler with alternating red and yellow stripes. The tumbler was empty. Holding it against the light, she stared through it wistfully as if she were regretting its emptiness, and I watched her do this with pleasure and no regrets whatever. There is a kind of legerdemain about a short coat over something shorter. It creates the illusion, even when you have evidence to the contrary, that it's all there is, there isn't any more.

"I like you, Mr. Hand," she said. "I like your looks."

"Thanks. I like yours too."

"Would you care for a drink?"

"Why not? It's a warm day."

"I had a gin and tonic before you came. Do you drink gin and tonic?"

"When it's offered. A gin and tonic would be fine."

She set the red and yellow tumbler on the glass top of the table and turned slightly in the direction of the entrance to the black and white tiled room.

"Gin and tonic, Maria," she said.

I had thought that the indeterminate maid with a face like half a walnut had gone away, and I felt a slight shock of surprise to discover that she had been standing all the while behind me. Now she nodded three times exactly, a repetition of the gesture she had made at the door, and backed away into the apartment and out of sight. Faith Salem sat down in a low wicker chair and crossed her feet at the ankles and stared at her long golden legs. I stared at them too.

"Please sit down, Mr. Hand," she said. "Maria will bring the gin and tonics in a moment. In the meanwhile, if you like, I can begin explaining why I asked you to come here."

"I'd appreciate it." I folded myself into her chair's mate. "I've been wondering, of course."

"Naturally." The full lower lip protruded a little, giving to her face a suggestion of darkness and brooding. "Let me begin by asking a question. Do you know Graham Markley?"

"Not personally. Like everyone else who reads the papers, I know something about him. Quondam boy wonder of finance. No boy any longer. If he's still a wonder, he doesn't work at it quite so hard. Works harder nowadays, from reports, at spending some of what he's made. Unless, of course, there's another Graham Markley."

"He's the one. Graham and I have an understanding."

There was, before the last word, a barely perceptible hesitation that gave to her statement a subtle and significant shading. She had explained in a breath, or in the briefest holding of a breath, the

acres of pile and tile in this lavish stone and steel tower with terraces that caught the afternoon sun for at least a little while. Delicately, she had told me who paid the rent.

"That's nice," I said. "Congratulations."

"It's entirely informal at present, but it may not remain so. He's asked me to marry him. Not immediately, which is impossible, but eventually."

"That'll be even better. Or will it?"

"It will. A certain amount of security attaches to marriage. There are certain compensations if the marriage fails." She smiled slowly, the smile beginning and growing and forcing from her face the dark and almost petulant expression of brooding, and in her eyes, which were brown, there was instantly a gleam of cynical good humor which was the effect, as it turned out, of a kind of casual compatibility she had developed with herself. "I haven't always had the good things that money buys, Mr. Hand, but I've learned from experience to live with them naturally. I don't think I would care now to live with less. With these good things that money buys, I'm perfectly willing to accept my share of the bad things that money seems invariably to entail. Is my position clear?"

"Yes, it is." I said. "It couldn't be clearer."

At that moment, Maria returned with a pair of gin and tonics in red and yellow glasses on a tray. She served one of them to Faith Salem and the other to me, and then she completed the three nods routine and went away again. The three nods, I now realized, was not a gesture of approval but an involuntary reaction to any situation to be handled, as my arrival earlier, or any situation already handled, as the serving of the drinks. I drank some of my tonic and liked it. There was a kind of astringency in the faintly bitter taste of the quinine. There was also, I thought now that it had been suggested to me, a kind of astringency in Faith Salem. A faintly bitter quality. A clean and refreshing tautness in her lean and lovely body and in her uncompromised compatibility with herself.

"Did you know Graham's wife?" she asked suddenly.

"Which one?" I said.

"The last one. Number three, I think."

"It doesn't matter. There was no purpose in my asking for the distinction. I didn't know number three, or two, or one. Graham Markley's wives and I didn't move in the same circles."

"I thought perhaps you might have met her professionally."

"As an employer or subject of investigation?"

"Either way."

"Neither, as a matter of fact. And if I had, I couldn't tell you."

"Ethics? I heard that about you.

Someone told me you were honorable and discreet. I believe it."

"Thanks. Also thanks to someone."

"That's why I called you. I'm glad now that I did."

"I know. You like my looks, and I like yours. We admire each other."

"Are you always so flippant?"

"Scarcely ever. The truth is, I'm very serious, and I take my work seriously. Do you have some work for me to do?"

She swallowed some more of her tonic and held the glass in her lap with both hands. Her expression was again rather darkly brooding, and she seemed for a moment uncertain of herself.

"Perhaps you won't want the job," she said.

I nodded. "It's possible."

"We'll see." She swallowed more of the tonic and looked suddenly more decisive. "Do you remember what happened to Graham's third wife?"

"I seem to remember that she left him, which wasn't surprising. So did number one. So did number two. Excuse me if I'm being offensive."

"Not at all. You're not required to like Graham. Many people don't. I confess that there are times when I don't like him very much myself. I did like his third wife, however. We were in college together, as a matter of fact. We shared an apartment one year. Her name was Constance Vaughan then. I left school that year, the year we shared the apartment, and we never saw each other again."

"You mean you never knew her as Mrs. Graham Markley?"

"Yes. I didn't know she'd married. In college she didn't seem, somehow, like the kind of girl who would ever marry anyone at all, let alone someone like Graham. That was a good many years ago, of course, and people change, I suppose. Anyhow, it was rather odd, wasn't it? I came here about a year ago from Europe, where I had been living with my second husband, who is not my husband any longer, and I met Graham and after a while entered into our present arrangement, which is comfortable but not altogether satisfactory, and then I learned that he had been married to Constance, whom I had known all that time ago. Don't you think that was quite odd?"

"It seems to meet the requirements of the term."

"Yes. The truth is, it made me feel rather strange. Especially when I discovered that she had simply disappeared about a year before."

"Disappeared?"

"Simply vanished. She hasn't been seen since by anyone who knew her here. You'll have to admit that it's peculiar. Numbers one and two left Graham and divorced him and tapped him for alimony, which he probably deserved, and this was sensible. It was not

sensible, however, simply to disappear without a trace and never sue for divorce and alimony, or even separate maintenance. Do you think so?"

"Off hand, I don't. There may have been good reasons. Surely an attempt was made to locate her."

"Oh, yes. Of course. Her disappearance was reported to the police, and they made an effort to find her, but it was kept pretty quiet, and I don't think anyone tried very hard. Because of the circumstances, you see."

"No, I don't see. What circumstances?"

"Well, Constance had a baby. A little boy that got to be almost two years old and died. Constance loved him intensely. That's the way she was about anyone or anything she loved. Very intense. It was rather frightening, in a way. Anyhow, when the little boy died, she seemed to be going right out of her mind with grief, and Graham was no consolation or comfort, of course, and then she met Regis Lawler. Psychologically, she was just ready for him, completely vulnerable, and she fell in love with him, and apparently they had an affair. To get to the point about circumstances, Regis Lawler disappeared the same night that Constance did, and that's why no one got too excited or concerned. It was assumed that they'd gone away together."

"Don't you believe that they did?"

"I don't know. I think I do. What do you think?"

"On the surface, it seems a reasonable assumption, but it leaves a lot of loose ends."

"That's it. That's what disturbs me. Too many loose ends. I don't like loose ends, Mr. Hand. Will you try to tie them up for me?"

"Find out where Constance Markley went?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"You mean you won't?"

"I mean I probably couldn't. Look at it this way. The police have far greater facilities for this kind of thing than any private detective, and they've tried without success. Or if they did find out where Constance Markley went, it was obviously not police business and was quietly dropped. Either way, I'd be wasting my time and your money to try to find her now."

"Don't worry about wasting my money."

"All right. I'll just worry about wasting my time."

"Is it wasted if it's paid for?"

"That's a good point. If you want to buy my time for a fee, why should I drag my heels? Maybe I'm too ethical."

"Does that mean you accept?"

"No. Not yet. Be reasonable, Miss Salem. If Constance Markley and Regis Lawler went off together, they might be anywhere in the country or out of it. The West Coast. South America. Europe.

Just about anywhere on earth."

She finished her tonic, lit a cigarette, and let her head fall slowly against the back of the wicker chair as if she were suddenly very tired. With her eyes closed, the shadows of her lashes on her cheeks, she seemed to be asleep in an instant, except for the thin blue plume of smoke expelled slowly from her lungs. After a few moments, her eyes still closed, she spoke again.

"Why should they do that? Why disappear? Why run away at all? Women are leaving husbands every day. Men are leaving wives. They simply leave. Why didn't Constance?"

"People do queer things sometimes. Usually there are reasons that seem good to the people. You said Mrs. Markley was an intense sort of person. You said she'd suffered a tragedy that nearly unbalanced her mentally. You implied that she hadn't been happy with Graham Markley. Maybe she just wanted to go away clean—no connections, no repercussions, nothing at all left of the old life but a man she loved and the few things she'd have to remember because she couldn't forget."

"I know. I've thought of that, and it's something that Constance might possibly have done, as I remember her."

"How do you remember her?"

"Well, as I said, she was intense. She was always excited or depressed, and I could never quite understand what she was excited or depressed about. Ideas that occurred to her or were passed on to her by someone. Impressions and suggestions. Things like that. Little things that would never have influenced most people in the least. She was pretty, in a way, but it took quite a while before you realized it. She had a kind of delicacy or fragility about her, but I don't believe that she was actually fragile physically. It was just an impression. She didn't appeal to men, and I never thought that men appealed to her. In the year we lived together, she never went out with a man that I can recall. Her parents had money. That's why I lived with her. I had practically no money at all then, and she took a fancy to me and wanted to rent an apartment for us, and so she did, and I stayed with her until near the end of the school year. I married a boy who also had money. Never mind me, though. The point is, we went away from school, and I didn't see Constance again. She was angry with me and refused to say good-by. I've always been sorry."

"How did she happen to meet and marry Graham Markley?"

"I don't know. Graham is susceptible to variety in women. Probably her particular kind of intangible prettiness, her fragility, something happened to appeal to him at the time they met. I imagine their marriage was one of those sudden, impulsive things

that usually should never happen."

"I see. How did you learn so much about her? Not back there in the beginning. I mean after she married Markley. About her baby, her affair with Lawler, those things."

"Oh, I picked up bits from various sources, but most of it I learned from Maria. She was maid to Constance, you see, when Constance and Graham were living together. When I came along and moved into this apartment, I sort of acquired her. Graham still had her and didn't know what to do with her, so he sent her over to me. Isn't that strange?"

"Convenient, I'd say. Did Maria see Constance Markley the night of her disappearance?"

"Yes. She helped Constance dress. Apparently she was the last person that Constance spoke to."

"May I speak with her for a moment?"

"If you wish. I'll get her."

2.

She got up and walked barefooted off the terrace into the black and white tiled room, and I drank the last of my gin and tonic and wished for another, and in about three minutes, not longer, she returned with Maria. She sat down again and told Maria that she could also sit down if she pleased, but Maria preferred to stand. Her small brown face was perfectly composed, and expressionless.

"What do you want me to tell you?" she said.

"I want you to answer a few questions about Mrs. Markley," I said. "Constance Markley, that is. Will you do that?"

"If I can."

"Miss Salem says that you saw Mrs. Markley the night she disappeared. Is that so?"

"It's so. I helped her dress for the evening."

"Did she go out alone?"

"Yes. Alone."

"Do you know where she was going?"

"I assumed that she was going to see Mr. Lawler. She didn't tell me."

"Did she go to see Mr. Lawler often?"

"Twice a week, maybe. Sometimes more."

"How do you know? Did she confide in you?"

"More in me than anyone else. She had to talk to someone."

"I see. Were you devoted to Mrs. Markley?"

"Yes. She was very kind, very unhappy. I pitied her."

"Because of the death of her child?"

"Partly because of that. I don't know. She was not happy."

"Did you approve of her affair with Mr. Lawler?"

"Not approve, exactly. I understood it. She needed a special kind of love. A kind of attention."

"Mr. Lawler gave her this?"

"He must have given it to her. Otherwise, she wouldn't have gone on with him. That's reasonable."

"Yes, it is. It's reasonable. And so are you, Maria. You're a very reasonable woman. Tell me. What was your impression of her the night she disppeared?"

"Pardon?"

"Her emotional state, I mean. Was she depressed? Cheerful?"

"Not depressed. Not cheerful. She was eager. There's a difference between eagerness and cheerfulness."

"That's true. Besides being reasonable, Maria, you are also perceptive. Did she seem excessively agitated in any way?"

"Just eager. She was always eager when she went to see Mr. Lawler."

"Do you think that Mr. Markley was aware of the relationship between his wife and Lawler?"

"I don't know. He didn't show much interest in anything Mrs. Markley did. Not even when the child died."

"All right. Just one more question, Maria. What time did Mrs. Markley leave here?"

"About eight. Perhaps a few minutes before or after."

"Thank you, Maria."

Maria turned her still brown face toward Faith Salem, who smiled and nodded. The maid nodded in return, three times, and went away. Faith Salem stood up abruptly, standing with her legs spread and her hands rammed into the patch pockets of the short white coat.

"Well?" she said.

"It looks hopeless," I said. "You'd be wasting your money."

"Perhaps so. If I don't waste it on you, I'll waste it on someone else."

"In that case, it might as well be me."

"You agree, then? You'll take the job?"

Looking up at her, I was beginning to feel dominated, which was not good, so I removed the feeling by standing.

"Tentatively," I said.

"What do you mean, tentatively?"

"I'll make a preliminary investigation. If anything significant or interesting comes out of it, I'll go ahead. If not, I'll quit. You'll pay my expenses and twenty-five dollars a day. Are those terms acceptable?"

"Yes. I accept."

"Another thing. I'm to be allowed to talk with whomever I think necessary. Is that also agreed?"

"Yes, of course." She hesitated, her soft lower lip protruding again in the darkly brooding expression. "You mean Graham, I suppose. I'd prefer, naturally, that he not know whom you're working for."

"I won't tell him unless I think it's advisable. I promise that much."

"That's good enough. I have confidence in your word, Mr. Hand."

"Ethical. Someone told you, and

you believe it, and that's what I am. I'll begin my investigation, if you don't mind, by asking you one more question. What are you afraid of?"

"Afraid? I'm afraid of nothing. I honestly believe that I've never been afraid of anything in my life."

"I'm ready to concede that you probably haven't. Let me put it differently. What disturbs you about Constance Markley's disappearance?"

"I've explained that. I don't like loose ends. Graham has asked me to marry him. For my own reasons, I want to accept. First, however, he has to get a divorce. He can get it, I suppose, on grounds of desertion. I only want to know that it really was desertion."

"That's not quite convincing. What alternative to desertion, specifically, do you have in mind?"

"You said you would ask one more question, Mr. Hand. You've asked two."

"Excuse me. You can see how dedicated I become to my work."

"I should appreciate that, of course, and I do. I honestly have no specific alternative in mind. I just don't like the situation as it stands. There's another thing, however. I knew Constance, and I liked her, and now by an exceptional turn of events I'm in the position of appropriating something that was hers. I want to know that it's all right. I want to know where she went, and why she went wherever she did, and that everything is all right there and will be all right here, whatever happens."

I believed her. I believed everything she told me. She was a woman I could not doubt or condemn or even criticize. If I had been as rich as Graham Markley, I'd have taken her away, later if not then, and I'd have kept her, and there would have been between us, in the end, more than the money which would have been essential in the beginning.

"I'll see what I can do," I said. "Do you have a photograph of Constance Markley that I can take along?"

"Yes. There's one here that Maria brought. I'll get it for you."

She went inside and was gone for a few minutes and came back with the photograph. I took it from her and put it into the side pocket of my coat without looking at it. There would be plenty of time later to look at it, and now, in the last seconds of our first meeting, I wanted to look at Faith Salem.

"Good-by," I said. "I'll see you again in a few days and let you know if I intend to go ahead."

"Call before you come," she said.

"Yes," I said. "Certainly."

"I'll see you to the door."

"No. Don't bother. You'd better stay here in the sun. In another half hour, it'll be gone."

"Yes. So it will." She looked up at the white disk in the sky beyond a ridge of tooled stone. "Good-by,

then. I'll be waiting to hear from you."

She offered me her hand, and I took it and held it and released it. In the middle of the black and white acre, I paused and looked back. She had already removed the short white coat and was lying on her stomach on the yellow pad. Her face was buried in the crook of an elbow.

I went on out and back to my office and put my feet on the desk and thought about her lying there in the sun. There was no sun in my office. In front of me was a blank wall, and behind me was a narrow window, and outside the narrow window was a narrow alley. Whenever I got tired of looking at the wall I could get up and stand by the window and look down into the alley, and whenever I got tired of looking into the alley I could sit down and look at the wall again, and whenever I got tired of looking at both the wall and the alley, which was frequently, I could go out somewhere and look at something else. Now I simply closed my eyes and saw clearly behind the lids a lean brown body interrupted in two places by the briefest of white hiatuses.

This was pleasant but not of the first importance. It was more important, though less pleasant, to think about Graham Markley. Conceding the priority of importance, I began reluctantly to think about him, and after a few minutes of reluctant thinking, I lowered my feet and reached for a telephone directory. After locating his name and number, I dialed the number and waited through a couple of rings, and then a voice came on that made me feel with its first careful syllable as if I'd neglected recently to bathe and clean my fingernails.

"Graham Markley's residence," the voice said.

"This is Percival Hand," I said. "I'm a private detective. I'd like to speak with Mr. Markley."

Ordinarily I use the abbreviated version of my name, just plain Percy, but I felt compelled by the voice to be as proper and impressive as possible. As it was, in the exorbitantly long pause that followed, I felt as if I had been unpardonably offensive.

"If you will just hold the wire," the voice said at last, "I shall see if Mr. Markley is at home."

Which meant, of course, that Mr. Markley was certainly at home, but that it remained to be seen if he would be so irresponsible as to talk with a private detective on the telephone, which was surely unlikely. I held the wire and waited. I inspected my nails and found them clean. I tried to smell myself and couldn't. Another voice came on abruptly, and it was, as it developed, the voice of Graham Markley.

"Graham Markley speaking. What can I do for you, Mr. Hand?"

"I'd like to make an appointment

to see you personally, if possible."

"About what?"

I had already considered the relative advantages in this particular instance of candor and deception, and I had decided that there was probably little or nothing to choose between them. In cases where deception gains me nothing, I'm always prepared to be candid, and that's what I was now.

"About your wife. Your third wife, that is."

"I can't imagine why my wife should be a point of discussion between you and me, Mr. Hand."

"I thought you might be able to give me some useful information."

There was a moment of waiting. The wire sang softly in the interim.

"For what purpose?" he said. "Am I to understand that you're investigating my wife's disappearance?"

"That's right."

"At whose request?"

"I'm not at liberty to say at the moment."

"Come, Mr. Hand. If you expect any cooperation from me, you'll have to be less reticent."

"I haven't received any cooperation from you yet, Mr. Markley."

"It was reasonably apparent to everyone, including the police and myself, why my wife went away. I confess that I can't see any use in stirring up an unpleasant matter that I had hoped was forgotten. Do you know anything that would justify it?"

Again I evaluated the advantages of candor and deception, and this time I chose deception. The advantages in its favor seemed so palpable, as a matter of fact, that the evaluation required no more than a second.

"I've learned something," I lied, "that I think will interest you."

"Perhaps you had better tell me what it is."

"Sorry. I'd rather not discuss it over the telephone."

"I can't see you today. It's impossible."

"Tomorrow will do. If you'll set a time, I'll be happy to call on you."

"That won't be necessary. I'll come to your office."

"I don't want to inconvenience you."

"Thank you for your consideration. However, I prefer to see you in your office. How about two o'clock tomorrow afternoon?"

"Good. I'll be expecting you."

I told him where my office was, and we said good-by and hung up. Rocking back in my chair, I elevated my feet again and closed my eyes. Faith Salem was still lying in the sun. I watched her for a few moments and then opened my eyes and lit a cigarette and began thinking about Regis Lawler. I didn't accomplish much by this, for I didn't have much material for thought to start with. I had met him casually a few times quite a while ago, in this or that place we had both gone to, but most of what

I knew about him was incidental to what I knew about his brother, who was older and generally more important and had more about him worth knowing.

The brother's name was Silas. After long and precarious apprentice years in a number of illegal operations, he had begun slowly to achieve a kind of acceptance, even respectability, that increased in ratio to the measure of his security. Now he was the owner of a fine restaurant. At least, it was a restaurant among other things, and it was that equally, if not primarily. When you went there, it was assumed that you had come for good food, and that's what you got. You got it in rich and quiet surroundings to the music of a string quartet that sometimes played Beethoven as well as Fritz Kreisler and Johann Strauss. The chefs were the best that Lawler could hire, and the best that Lawler could hire were as good as any and better than most. On the correct principle that good food should tolerate no distractions, the service was performed by elderly colored waiters who were artists in the difficult technique of being solicitous without being obtrusive.

If you wanted distractions, you went downstairs, below street level. This was known as the Apache Room, a little bit of the Left Bank transplanted, and it was phony and made no pretense of being anything else, and it was frankly for people who liked it that way. There were red-checked cloths on the tables, pretty girls with pretty legs who serviced the tables, a small orchestra with the peculiar quality that is supposed to be peculiarly Parisian, and murals all around the walls of girls in black stockings doing the can-can alternating with other murals of other girls being maltreated by Apaches and always showing quite a lot of one white thigh above a fancy garter in the deep slit of a tight skirt.

On the floor above the restaurant, up one flight of carpeted stairs, you could go to gamble if you chose. In a series of three large rooms muffled in drapes and carpets, you could play roulette or poker or blackjack or shoot dice, and sometimes you might even win at one or the other or all, but more often, of course, you lost and were expected to lose graciously. If you did not, as sometimes happened, you were escorted outside by a brace of hard-handed gentlemen in evening clothes, and you were thereafter *persona non grata* until you received absolution and clearance from Silas Lawler himself. The games were reputed to be honest, and, all things considered, they probably were.

In the basement, you could dance and make moderate love and get drunk, if you wished, on expensive drinks. In the restaurant, you did not get drunk or dance or make love or look at naughty murals. In the game rooms, you gambled

quietly with no limit except your own judgment and bank account, and you saved everything else for some other place and some other time. Patrons passed as they pleased from one level to another, but the atmosphere was never permitted to go with them. The basement never climbed the stairs, nor did the upper floors descend.

Silas Lawler was, in brief, not a man to be taken lightly, or a man who would take lightly any transgression against himself or his interests. It was, I reflected, wholly incredible that he would be indifferent to the disappearance of a brother. Whatever the reason for the disappearance, whatever the technique of its execution, Silas Lawler knew it, or thought he knew it, and he might be prevailed upon to tell me in confidence, or he might not, but in any event it would be necessary for me to talk with him as soon as I could, which would probably be tomorrow. I would see Graham Markley at two, and later I would try to see Silas Lawler, and if nothing significant came of these two meetings I would go again to see Faith Salem, which would be a pleasure, and terminate our relationship, which would not.

Having thought my way back to Faith Salem, I closed my eyes and tried to find her, but the sun had left the terrace, and so had she. Opening my eyes, I lowered my feet and stood up. I had determined an agenda of sorts, and now there seemed to be nothing of importance left to do on this particular day. Besides, it was getting rather late, and I was getting rather hungry, and so I went out and patronized a steak house and afterward spent one-third of the night doing things that were not important and not related to anything that had gone before. About ten o'clock I returned to the room and bath and hot plate that I euphemistically called home. I went to bed and slept well.

3.

I woke up at seven in the morning, which is a nasty habit of mine that endures through indiscretions and hangovers and intermittent periods of irregular living. In the bathroom, I shaved and necessarily looked at my face in the mirror. *I like you, Mr. Hand,* Faith Salem had said. *I like your looks.* Well, it was an ambiguous expression. You could like the looks of a Collie dog or a pair of shoes or a Shoebill stork. It could mean that you were inspired by confidence or amusement or the urge to be a sister. Looking at my face, I was not deluded. I decided that I was probably somewhere between the dog and the stork. I finished shaving and dressed and went out for breakfast and arrived in due time at my office, where nothing happened all morning.

Two o'clock came, but Graham Markley didn't. At ten after, he did.

I heard him enter the little cubbyhole in which my clients wait when there is another client ahead of them, which is something that should happen oftener than it does, and when I got to the door to meet him, he was standing there looking antiseptic among the germs. His expression included me with the others.

"Mr. Hand?" he said.

"That's right. You're Mr. Markley, I suppose?"

"Yes. I'm sorry to be late."

"Think nothing of it. In this office, ten minutes late is early. Come in, please."

He walked past me and sat down in the client's chair beside the desk. Because I felt he would consider it an imposition, I didn't offer to shake hands. I felt that he might even ignore or reject the offer, which would have made me indignant or even indiscreet. Resuming my place in the chair behind the desk, I made a quick inventory and acquired an impression. He sat rigidly, with his knees together and his hat on his knees. His straight black hair was receding but still had a majority present. His face was narrow, his nose was long, his lips were thin. Arrogance was implicit. He looked something like the guy who used to play Sherlock Holmes in the movies. Maybe he looked like Sherlock Holmes.

"Precisely what do you want to tell me, Mr. Hand?" he said.

"Well," I said, "that isn't quite my position. What I want is for you to tell me something."

"Indeed? I gathered from our conversation on the telephone yesterday that you were in possession of some new information regarding my wife."

"Did I infer that? It isn't exactly true. What I meant to suggest was that the available information isn't adequate. It leaves too much unexplained."

"Do you think so? The police apparently didn't. As a matter of fact, it was quite clear to everyone what my wife had done. It was, as you may realize, an embarrassing affair for me, and there seemed to be no good purpose in giving it undue publicity or in pursuing it indefinitely."

"Do you still feel that way? That there is no purpose in pursuing it any further?"

"Until yesterday I did. Now I'm not so sure. I don't wish to interfere with whatever kind of life my wife is trying to establish for herself, nor do I wish to restore any kind of contact between her and me, but since our telephone conversation I've begun to feel that it would be better for several reasons if she could be located."

"Are you prepared to help?"

"Conditionally."

"What conditions?"

"Are you, for your part, prepared to tell me who initiated this investigation?"

"What action would you consider

taking if I were to tell you?"

"None. The truth is, I'm certain that I know. I merely want to verify it."

"You're probably right."

"Miss Salem? I thought so. Well, it's understandable. Under the circumstances of our relationship, she's naturally concerned. She urged me once previously to try again to locate my wife, but I wasn't inclined to reopen what was, as I said, an unpleasant and embarrassing affair. Apparently I underestimated the strength of her feeling."

"You don't resent her action, then?"

"Certainly not. I'm particularly anxious to settle any uneasiness she may feel. I'm even willing to assume the payment of your fee."

"That's between you and her, of course. Will you tell me why you think your wife disappeared?"

"As to why she disappeared, I can only speculate. As to why she left, which is something else, I'm certain. She was having an affair with a man named Regis Lawler. They went away together. The relationship between my wife and me had deteriorated by that time to such an extent that I really didn't care. I considered it a satisfactory solution to our problem."

"Satisfactory? You said painful and embarrassing."

"Painful and embarrassing because it was humiliating. Any husband whose wife runs away with another man looks rather ridiculous. I mean that I had no sense of loss."

"I see. Did she give you any idea that she was leaving before she went?"

"None. We didn't see each other often the last few months we lived together. When we did see each other, we found very little to say."

"You said you could only speculate as to why she disappeared instead of leaving openly. I'd like to hear your speculation."

"You would need to have known her before you could understand. She was, to put it kindly, rather unstable. Less kindly, she was neurotic. She may have been almost psychotic at times. I don't know. I don't understand the subtle distinctions between these things. Anyhow, she had had a bad time when our child died. At first, after the initial shock, she became withdrawn and depressed, totally uninterested in living. Later there was a reaction. A kind of hysterical appetite for activity and experiences. It was then that she met Regis Lawler. It's my opinion that she disappeared because she wanted to cut herself off completely from the life that had included our marriage and the death of our child. It's difficult to believe, I know."

"I wouldn't say so. Not so difficult. I've already considered that motivation, as a matter of fact. It seems to fit in with the little I know about her. There's another point,

however, that bothers me. Was Regis Lawler the kind of man to fall in with such a scheme?

"I can't answer that. If he was devoted to her, it's fair to assume that he would do as she wished, especially if she convinced him that it was something she desperately needed."

"Possibly. I didn't know Lawler well enough to have an idea. Miss Salem said that Mrs. Markley's family had quite a lot of money. Did Mrs. Markley herself have any?"

"No. Her mother and father were both dead when we married. If they had money at one time, which I believe was so, it had been dissipated. The estate, I understand, did little more than pay the claims against it."

"Then your wife had no personal financial matters to settle before she left?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Was Regis Lawler a wealthy man?"

"I have no idea. His brother apparently is."

"Well, you can see what I'm getting at. It would not be a simple matter for a man of wealth to disappear. It would certainly entail the liquidation of assets—securities, property, things like that. He'd have to convert his wealth to negotiable paper that he could carry with him. If he wanted to assure his not being traced through them, he'd have to convert to cash. Do you know if Regis Lawler did any such thing?"

"No. But the police surely made such an obvious investigation. Since it was not an issue, it follows that Lawler did do something of the sort, that he had no holdings to convert."

"Right. If Lawler had left much behind, the police wouldn't have quit investigating. They'd have smelled more than a love affair. As you say, he either converted or had nothing to convert. At any rate, he must have had considerable cash in hand. Running way with a woman, I mean, wouldn't be any two-dollar tour. Unless he had a job arranged somewhere, an assured income, he must have been, putting it mildly, damn well heeled."

"Oh, I think it's safe to assume that he had at least enough cash to last a while. I can't imagine that Regis Lawler was a pauper."

His tone implied that no one but a simpleton, specifically me, would waste time speculating about it. I was beginning to think he was right. That was okay, though. I had been convinced from the beginning that I was wasting my time on the whole case. That was okay too, since I was doing it for a fee.

"How long ago was it that Mrs. Markley left?" I said.

"Two years ago next month."

"Did she take anything with her? Any clothes, for example? I know from talking with her maid that she took nothing when she left

home that night, but I'm thinking she might have taken or sent luggage ahead to be picked up later. She'd have done something like that, I imagine, if she was being secretive."

"No doubt. On the other hand, if you accept the theory that she intended to make a complete break, she might not have wanted to keep any of her old possessions, not even her clothes. I don't find this incredible in her case. Anyhow, I honestly don't know if she took anything. She had closets full of clothes, of course. If anything was missing, I wouldn't know."

"How about the maid?"

"She thought that nothing was missing, but she wasn't positive." He looked at his wrist watch and stood up abruptly, his knees still together as they had been all the time he was sitting, and he had, looking down at me, a kind of stiff, military bearing and collateral arrogance. "I'm sorry to end this interview, Mr. Hand, but I have another appointment. You'll have to excuse me."

"Certainly," I said. "I was running out of questions, anyhow. Thanks very much for coming in."

"I'm afraid I haven't been very helpful."

"You never know. It doesn't sound like much now, but it may mean something later."

I walked around the desk and with him to the door. I didn't offer to shake hands, and nether did he.

"Please inform Miss Salem or me of any progress," he said.

"I'm not optimistic," I said.

The door closed between us, and I went back and sat down. As far as I was concerned, I was still wasting time.

4.

From street level I went up two shallow steps into a spacious hall. The floor was carpeted. The walls were paneled with dark and lustrous walnut. At the far end of the hall, a broad sweep of stairs ascended. To my right as I entered was the dining room. The floor was carpeted in there also, and the walls were also walnut paneled. Tables were covered with snowy cloths and set with shining silver. A few early diners were dining. The string quartet was playing something softly that I remembered by sound and remembered after a moment by name. *Stars in My Eyes.* By Fritz Kreisler. A very pretty tune.

I looked right. A cocktail lounge was over that way, beyond a wide entrance and down a step. A number of people were drinking cocktails. There was no music. I recognized a martini, which was all right, a manhattan, which was better, and an alexander, which you can have. Everything was very elegant, very sedate. Maybe someone saw me, maybe not. No one spoke to me or tried to stop me. I

walked down the hall and up the stairs.

The carpet went up with me, but the walnut stayed below. The hall upstairs ran a gauntlet of closed doors recessed in plaster. It was nice plaster, though, rough textured and painted a soft shade of brown. Cinnamon or Nutmeg or one of the names that brown acquires when it becomes a decorator color. It was too early for the games, and the rooms behind the doors were quiet. All, that is, except the last room behind the last door, which was the private room of Silas Lawler. Someone in there was playing a piano. A Chopin waltz was being played. I thought at first it was a recording, but then I decided it wasn't. It was good, but not good enough.

I opened the door softly and stepped inside and closed the door behind me. It was Silas Lawler himself at the piano. He turned his face toward me, but his eyes had the kind of blind glaze that the eyes of a man may have when he is listening to good music or looking at his mistress or thinking of something a long way off. A pretty girl was sitting in a deep chair on the back of her neck. She had short black hair and smoky eyes and a small red petulant mouth. She was facing the door and me directly, and her eyes moved over me lazily without interest. Otherwise, she did not move in the slightest, and she did not speak.

Lawler finished the Chopin waltz, and the girl said, "That was nice, Lover." She moved nothing but her lips, in shaping the words, and her eyes, which she rolled toward him in her head. She didn't sound as if she meant what she said, and Lawler didn't look as if he believed her. He didn't even look as if he heard her. He was still staring at me, and the glaze was dissolving in his eyes.

"Who are you?" he said.

"Percy Hand," I said. "We've met."

"That's right," he said. "I remember you. Don't you believe in knocking?"

"I didn't want to interrupt the music. I like Chopin."

"Do you? It's better when it's played right."

"You play it fine. I thought at first it was Brailowsky."

"If you thought it was Brailowsky, you've never heard him."

"I've heard him, all right. I went to a concert once. I got a couple records."

"In that case, you've got no ear for music. Brailowsky and I don't sound alike."

"Maybe not. Maybe it was just the shock of hearing you play at all. I never figured Silas Lawler for a pianist."

"I was a deprived kid. I had secret hungers. I made some money and took lessons."

"So was I. So had I. I didn't."

"Make money or take lessons?"

"Both."

"You can see he's poor," the girl said. "He wears ready-made suits."

"Botany 500," I said. "Sixty-five bucks."

Lawler looked at her levelly across the grand. I could have sworn that there was an expression of distaste on his face. The deprived kid business was on the level, I thought. He remembered the time. He didn't like people who made cracks about the poor.

"This is Robin Robbins," he said carefully. "She's pretty, but she's got no manners. That isn't her real name, by the way. She didn't think the one she had was good enough. The man you're trying to insult, honey, is Percy Hand, a fairly good private detective."

"He looks like Jack Palance," she said.

"Jack Palance is ugly," I said, "God, he's ugly."

"So are you," she said.

"Thanks," I said.

"In a nice way," she said. "Jack Palance is ugly in a nice way, and so are you. I don't really care if you're poor."

"Just as long as you're good in bed," Lawler said. "Come over here."

I walked over and stood beside the piano. Now I could see the girl only by looking over my shoulder. Instead, I looked down at Lawler. His face was clean shaven and square. He was neither tall nor fat, but he must have weighed two hundred. His hands rested quietly on the piano keys. They looked like chunks of stone.

"Here I am," I said. "Why?"

"I want to be able to reach you in case you haven't got a good reason for busting in here."

"I've got a reason. You tell me if it's good."

"I'll let you know. One way or another."

"I want to talk about a couple people you know. Or knew. Your brother and Constance Markley."

He didn't budge. His face stayed still, his body stayed still, the hands on the keys stayed still as stone.

"It's lousy. I'd be bored to death."

"Is that so? I'm beginning to get real interested in them."

"That's your mistake. While we're on mistakes, I'll point out another. He isn't my brother. Not even step-brother. Foster brother."

"That makes it less intimate, I admit. Not quite impersonal, though. Wouldn't you like to know where he is? How he is? Or maybe you already know."

"I don't. I don't want to."

"Well, I never heard the like. A man's wife disappears. He doesn't care. A man's foster brother disappears. He doesn't care. The indifference fascinates me."

"Let me figure this." His right hand suddenly struck a bass chord and dropped off the keys into his lap. The sound waves lingered, faded, died. "I've got a sluggish mind, and I think slow. Regis and

Constance ran away. You're a private detective. Could it be you're trying to make yourself a case?"

"I'm not making any case. The case is made. I'm just working on it."

"Take my advice. Don't. Drop it. Forget it. It isn't worth your time."

"My time's worth twenty-five dollars a day and expenses. That's what I'm getting paid."

"Who's paying?"

"Sorry. I'm not at liberty to say."

"It's not enough."

"I get by on it."

"Not enough to pay a hospital bill, I mean. Or the price of a funeral, even."

The girl stood up suddenly and stretched. She made a soft mewing sound, like a cat. I turned my head and watched her over my shoulder. Her breasts thrust out against her dress, her spread thighs strained against her tight skirt.

"I think I'll go away somewhere," she said. "I abhor violence."

"You do that, honey," Silas Lawler said.

She walked across to the door, and she walked pretty well. She had nice legs that moved nicely. You could follow the lines of her behind in the tight skirt. I'd have been more impressed if I hadn't seen Faith Salem lying in the sun. At the door, before going out, she paused and looked back at me and grinned.

"You couldn't hurt his face much," she said. "You could change it, but you couldn't hurt it."

She was gone, and I said, "Lovely thing. Is it yours?"

"Now and then." He shrugged. "If you're interested, I won't be offended."

"I'm not. Besides, I'm too ugly. Were you threatening me a moment ago?"

"About the hospital, yes. About the funeral, no. It wouldn't be necessary."

"You never can tell. I get tired of living sometimes."

"You'd get tireder of being dead."

"That could be. The way I hear it explained, it sounds pretty dull."

"You're a pretty sharp guy, Hand. You've got a nose for what's phony. I'm surprised a guy like you wouldn't smell a phony case."

"I won't say I haven't. I'm open to conviction."

"All right. Regis and Constance had a real fire going. It didn't develop, it was just there in both of them at first sight. First sight was right here. Downstairs in the lounge. Don't ask me to explain it, because I can't. Regis was there, and Constance was there, and to hell with everyone else. Everyone and everything. They got in bed, and whatever they had survived. They ran away together, that's all. Why don't you leave it alone?"

"You make it sound so simple. I can't help thinking, though, that running away's one thing, disappearing's another. You see the dif-

ference? There is one you know."

"I see. It wouldn't seem so strange if you'd known the woman. Constance, I mean. She'd had a bad time. She was sad, lost, looking for a way to somewhere. You get me? She was a real lady, but she had queer ideas. When she left, she wanted to leave it all, including herself. It's pathetic when you stop to think about it."

"I get the same picture everywhere. The same idea. I'm beginning to believe it. I'm sceptical about Regis, though. He doesn't seem the type."

"He wasn't. Not before he met Constance. Before he met her, he was a charming, no-good bastard, but then he met her, and he changed. Queer. You wouldn't have thought she'd have appealed to him, but she did. He'd have done anything she wanted. Very queer."

"Yeah. Queer and corny."

"I don't blame you for thinking so. You'd have to see it to believe it."

"Did Regis have an interest in this restaurant?"

"Regis didn't have a pot. Just what I gave him. Spending money."

"What did they use for cash when they left? What are they using now? And don't feed me any more corn. You don't live on love. Some people get a job and live in a cottage, but not Regis and Constance. Everything they were and did is against it."

The fingers of his left hand moved up the keys. It was remarkable how lightly that chunk of rock moved. The thin sounds of the short scale lasted no longer than a few seconds. The left hand joined the right in his lap.

"I'll tell you something," he said. "I don't know why. What I ought to do is throw you out of here. Anyhow, Regis had cash. Enough for a lifetime in the right place. See that picture over there? It's a copy of a Rembrandt. Behind it there's a safe. Regis knew the combination. The night he went away, I had seventy-five grand in it. Regis took it."

"That's a lot of cash to have in a safe behind a picture."

"I had it for a purpose. Never mind what."

"You let him get away with it? You didn't try to recover it?"

"No. To tell the truth, I was relieved. I always felt an obligation toward him because of the woman whose lousy kid he was. Now the obligation is wiped out. We're quits." He lifted both hands and replaced them gently on the keys of the piano. There was not the slightest sound from the wires inside. "Besides, I figured it was partly for her. For Constance. I liked her. I hope she's happier than she ever was."

I started to refer again to corn, but I thought better of it. Then I thought that it would probably be a good time to leave, and I turned

and went as far as the door.

"Hand," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"Forget it. Drop it. You hear me?"

"I hear you," I said.

I opened the door and went out. After three steps in the hall, I heard the piano. What I heard from it was something else by Chopin.

5.

On the way in, no one had spoken to me. On the way out, someone did. The lower hall was the place, and Robin Robbins was the person. She was standing in the entrance to the cocktail lounge, at the edge of the shallow step, and although she was standing erect, like a lady, she somehow gave the impression of leaning indolently against an immaterial lamppost. Her voice was lazy, threaded with a kind of insolent amusement.

"Buy me a drink?" she said.

"I'm too poor," I said.

"Tough. Let me buy you one."

"I'm too proud."

"Poor and proud. My God, it sounds like something by Horatio Alger."

"Junior."

"What?"

"Horatio Alger, Junior. You forgot the junior."

"I'm sorry I didn't forget him altogether. What do you say we start trying?"

"I'm surprised you know anything about him to start trying to forget. He was a long time ago, honey. Were kids still reading him when you were a kid?"

"I wouldn't know. I was never a kid. I was born old and just got older."

"Like me. That gives us something in common, I guess. Maybe we ought to have that drink together after all. I'll buy."

"No. I've got a better idea for a poor, proud man. In my apartment there's a bottle of scotch left over from another time. Someone gave it to me. We could go there and drink out of it for free."

"I don't care for scotch. It tastes like medicine."

"There's a bottle of bourbon there too. In case you don't care for bourbon, there's rye."

"No brandy? No champagne?"

"Anything you want."

"That's quite a selection to be left over from other times. Was it all given to you?"

"Why not? People are always giving me something. They seem to enjoy it."

"Thanks for offering to share the wealth. However, I don't think so. Some other time, maybe."

She opened a small purse she was holding in her hands and extracted a cigarette. I went closer and supplied a light. She inhaled and exhaled and stared into the smoke with her smoky eyes. Her breath coming out with the smoke made a soft, sighing sound.

"Suit yourself," she said. "It's just that I've got something I thought you might be interested in."

"You've got plenty I might be interested in, honey."

She dragged again and sighed again. The smoke thinned and hung in a pale blue haze between us. In her eyes was a suggestion of something new. Something less than insolence, a little more than amusement. Her lush little mouth curved amiably.

"That's not quite what I meant, but it's something to consider. What I meant was something I can tell you."

"Information? Is it free like the scotch and the bourbon and the rye? Don't forget I'm a guy who wears ready-made suits."

"I remember. Poor and proud and probably honest. Right out of H. Alger, Junior. Don't worry about it, though. It's free like the scotch and the bourbon and the rye."

"Everything free. No price on anything. I hope you won't be offended, honey, but somehow I got an idea it's out of character."

"All right. Forget it. You were asking questions about a couple of people, and I thought you were interested. My mistake, Horatio."

Her mouth curved now in the opposite direction from amiability. What had been in her eyes was gone, and what replaced it was contempt. I thought in the instant before she turned away that she was going to spit on the floor. Before she could descend the step and walk away nicely on her nice legs with the neat movement of her neat behind, I took a step and put a hand on her arm, and we stood posed that way for a second or two or longer, she arrested and I arresting, and then she turned her head and looked at me over her shoulder.

"Yes?" she said.

"Make mine bourbon," I said.

We went the rest of the way down the hall together and down the two steps and outside. Beside the building was a paved parking lot reserved for patrons, and I had left my car there, although I was not properly a patron. We walked around and got into the car and drove in it to her apartment, which was in a nice building on a good street. It was on the fifth floor, which we reached by elevator, and it didn't have any terrace that got the sun in the afternoon, or any terrace at all, or any of many features that the apartment of Faith Salem had, including several acres, but it was a nice enough apartment just the same, a far better apartment than any I had ever lived in or probably ever would. Besides, it was certainly something that someone had just wanted to give her. For a consideration, of course. An exchange, in a way, of commodities.

"Fix a bourbon for yourself," she said. "For me too, in water. I'll be back in a minute."

She went out of the room and was gone about five times as long as the minute. In the meanwhile, I found ingredients and mixed two bourbon highballs and had them ready when she returned. She looked just the same as she'd looked when she'd gone, which was good enough to be disturbing.

"I lose," I said.

"Some people always do," she said. "Lose what, exactly?"

"A bet. With myself. I bet you'd gone to get into something more comfortable."

"Why should I? What I'm wearing is comfortable enough. There's practically nothing to it."

I was facing her with a full glass in each hand. She approached me casually, as if she were going to ask for a light or brush a crumb off my tie. She kept right on walking, right into me, and put her arms around my neck and her mouth on my mouth, and I stood there with my arms projecting beyond her on both sides, the damn glasses in my hands, and we remained static and breathless in this position for quite a long time. Finally she stepped back and helped herself to the glass in one of my hands. She took a drink and tilted her head and subjected me and my effect to a smoldering appraisal.

"I've always wanted to kiss a man as ugly as you," she said. "It wasn't bad."

"Thanks," I said. "I've had worse myself, but under better conditions."

"I'm wondering if it's good enough to develop. I think it might be."

"You go on wondering about it and let me know."

"I'll do that."

She moved over to a chair and lowered herself onto her neat behind and crossed her nice legs. From where I found a chair and sat, across from her, I could see quite a lot of the legs. She didn't mind, and neither did I.

"If you decide to develop it," I said, "won't Silas Lawler object?"

She swallowed some more of her highball and looked into what was left. Her soft and succulent little mouth assumed lax and ugly lines.

"To hell with Silas Lawler," she said.

"Don't kid me," I said. "I know he pays the bills."

"So he pays the bills. There's one bill he may owe that he hasn't paid. If he owes it, I want him to pay in full."

"For what?"

"For the murder of Regis Lawler."

She continued to look into her glass. From her expression, she must have seen something offensive on the bottom. I looked into mine and saw nothing but good whisky and pure water. I drained it.

"Maybe you don't know what you said," I said.

"I know what I said. I said he *may* owe it. I'd like to know."

"And I'd like to know what makes you think he may."

"Start with that fairy tale about Regis and Constance Markley running off together. Just disappearing completely so they could have a beautiful new life together. Do you believe it?"

"I don't believe it. I don't disbelieve it. I've got an open mind."

"Brother, if you'd known Regis Lawler as well as I did, you'd know the whole idea is phony. He just wasn't the type."

"I've heard that. I've also heard that he was in love with Constance. It's been suggested that he might have done for her what he wouldn't have done for anyone else."

"That's another phony bit. His being in love with Constance, I mean. He wasn't."

"No? This is a new angle. Convince me."

"Maybe I can't. I don't have any letters or tapes or photographs. Neither does anyone else, thank God. I could give you some interesting clinical descriptions, but I won't. Basically I'm a modest girl. I like my privacy."

"I think I get you, but I'm not sure. Are you telling me more or less delicately that Regis had love enough for two?"

"Two? Is that all the higher you can count? Anyhow, what's love? All I know is, we went through the motions of what passes for love in my crowd, and he seemed to enjoy it. Whatever you call it, he felt more of it for me than he felt for anyone else, including Constance, and I guess you couldn't have expected more than that from Regis."

Her little mouth had for a moment a bitter twist. The bitterness tainted the sound of her words. She did not have the look and sound of a woman who had been rejected. She had the look and sound of a woman who had been accepted with qualifications and used without them. Most of all, a woman who had understood the qualifications from the beginning and had accepted them and submitted to them.

"Excuse me," I said. "I always have trouble understanding anything when it gets the least complicated. You were having Regis on the side of Silas, and Regis was having you on the side of Constance. Not that I want to make you sound like a chaser or a dish of buttered peas. Is that right?"

"Damn it, that's what I said."

"And Silas killed Regis in anger because he found out about it. Is that what you mean?"

"It's a solid thought. I like it better than the fairy tale."

"I'm not sure that I share your preference. I don't want to hurt you, honey, but I doubt like hell that Silas considers you worth killing for. He just gave me permission to try my luck if the notion struck me, but maybe he didn't really mean it. Anyhow, you'll have to admit that it doesn't sound like

a case of homicidal jealousy."

"Who mentioned jealousy?" She shrugged angrily, a small gesture of dismissal. "He's proud. He's vain and sensitive. He's made a hell of a lot out of nothing at all, but he can't forget that he only went to the fourth grade and got where he is by doing things proper people don't do. He still feels secretly inferior and insecure, and he always will. The one thing he can't stand is the slightest suggestion of contempt. He'd kill anyone for that. Can you think of anything more contemptuous than taking another man's wife or mistress?"

I thought of seventy-five grand. It seemed to me that helping yourself to that much lettuce was a contemptuous act too, and I thought about discussing it as a motive for murder, but I couldn't see that it would get me anywhere in present circumstances, and so I decided against it.

"So he killed Regis," I said. "That was a couple of years ago. And ever since he's gone on with you as if nothing at all had happened. After murder, business as usual at the same old stand. Is that it?"

"Sure. Why not? Laughing like hell all the time. Feeling all the time the same kind of contempt for Regis and me that he imagines we felt for him. Silas would get a lot of satisfaction out of something like that." She looked down into her glass, swirling what was left of her drink around and around the inner circumference. Bitterness increased the distortion of her mouth. "He'll throw me out after a while," she said.

"You're quite a psychologist," I said. "All that stuff about inferiority and insecurity and implied contempt. I wish I had as much brains as you."

"All right, you bastard. So I'm the kind who ought to stick to the little words. So I only went to the eighth grade myself. Go ahead and ridicule me."

"You're wrong. I wasn't ridiculing you. I never ridicule anyone. The trouble your theory has is the same trouble that the other theory has, and the trouble with both is that they leave loose ends all over the place. I can mention a few, if you'd care to hear them."

"Mention whatever you please."

"All right. Where's the body?"

"I don't know. You're the detective. Work on it."

"Where's Constance? Did he kill both of them? If so, why? He had no reason to hate her. As a matter of fact, they should have been on the same team. You, not Constance, would have been the logical second victim."

"I know. Don't you think I've thought of that a thousand times? Maybe she knew he killed Regis. Maybe she learned about it somehow or even actually witnessed it. Damn it, I've told you something you didn't know. I've told you

about Regis and me. I've told you he was not really in love with Constance and would never have run away with her for any longer than a weekend. I've told you this, and it's the truth, and all you do is keep wanting me to be the detective. You're the detective, brother. I've told you that too."

"Sure you have. I'm the detective, and all I've got to do is explain how someone killed a man and a woman and completely disposed of their bodies. That would be a tough chore, honey. Practically impossible."

"Silas Lawler's been doing the practically impossible for quite a few years. He's a very competent guy."

"He is. I know it, and I'm not forgetting it. However, I can think of a third theory that excludes him. It's simpler and it ties up an end or two. You said Regis didn't love Constance. He just had an affair with her. Suppose he tried to end the affair and got himself killed for his trouble? She was a strange female, I'm told. Almost psychotic, someone said. Do you think she was capable?"

Robin Robbins stood up abruptly. She carried her glass over to the ingredients and stood quietly with her back to me. Apparently she was only considering whether she should mix herself another or not. She decided not. Depositing her glass, she helped herself to a cigarette from a box and lit it with a lighter. Trailing smoke, she returned to her chair.

"Oh, Constance was capable, all right," she said. "She was much too good to do a lot of things I've done and will probably do again and again if the price is right, but there's one thing she could have done that I couldn't, and that's murder. And if you think that sounds like more eighth grade psychology, you can forget it and get the hell out of here."

"I don't know about the psychology," I said, "but I'm pretty sure that you don't really think she killed Regis. If you did, you'd be happy to say so."

"That's right." She nodded in amiable agreement. "I wouldn't mind at all doing Constance a bad turn, but she didn't kill Regis. That's obvious."

"I'm inclined to agree. In the first place, she couldn't have got rid of the body. In the second place, if she could and did, why run away afterward? It wouldn't be sensible."

"Well, it's your problem, brother. I guess it's time you went somewhere else and began to think about it."

"Yeah. I'm the detective. You've told me and told me. You haven't told me much else, though. Not anything very convincing. You got an idea that Silas killed Regis because you and Regis made a kind of illicit cuckold of him, and you lure me here with free bourbon and tell me so, and I'm supposed

to be converted by this evangelical message. It's pretty thin, if you don't mind my saying it. Excuse me for being skeptical."

"That's all right. I didn't expect much from you anyhow. I just thought I'd try."

"Try harder."

"I've got nothing more to tell you."

"Really? That's hard to believe. You're not exactly inexpensive, honey, and I'll bet you have to earn your keep. What I mean is, you and Silas surely get convivial on occasions. Even intimate. Men are likely to become indiscreet under such circumstances. They say things they wouldn't ordinarily say. If Silas killed Regis because of you, I'd think he'd even have an urge to gloat. By innuendo, at least."

She moved her head against the back of her chair in a lazy negative. "I'm a girl who knows the side of her bread the butter is on, and I earn my keep. You're right there. But you're wrong if you think Silas Lawler is the kind who gets confidential or careless. He's a very reserved guy, and he protects his position. He tends to his own business, and most of his business nowadays is on the three floors of the building we just left. To be honest, he's pretty damn dull. He works. He eats and sleeps and plays that damn piano, and once in a while he makes love. Once a month, for a few days, he goes to some place called Amity."

"Amity? Why does he go there?"

"I wouldn't know. I guess he has interests."

"Do you ever go with him?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I'm never invited, thank God. Who wants to go to Amity?"

I took a deep breath and held it till it hurt and then released it.

"That's right," I said. "Who does? Incidentally there's something else that nags me. It seems to me that you're trying to ruin a good thing for yourself, and I don't understand it. What happens to you and all this if Silas turns out to be a murderer?"

"Whatever it is, I'll try to bear it. I may even celebrate. In the meanwhile, on the chance that I'm wrong about him, I may be as well be comfortable."

I stood up and looked down, and she stayed down and looked up, and because she was a shrewd and tough wench with looks and brains and queer attachments and flexible morals, I though it would be pleasant and acceptable to kiss her once in return for the time she'd kissed me once, and that's what I did, and it was. It was pleasant and acceptable. It even started being exciting. Just as her hands were reaching for me, I straightened and turned and walked to the door, and she came out of the chair after me. She put her arms around my waist from behind.

"It's worth developing," she said. "I've been thinking about it, and I've decided."

"Sorry," I said. "My own mind isn't made up yet. I'll let you know."

I loosened her hands and held them in mine against my belly. After a few seconds, I dropped them and opened the door and started out.

"You ugly bastard," she said.

"Don't call me," I said. "I'll call you."

"Go to hell," she said.

I got on out and closed the door softly and began wishing immediately that I hadn't.

6.

The next morning I checked a couple of morgues. The newspaper variety. I turned the brittle bones of old dailies and disturbed the rest of dead stories, but I learned nothing of significance regarding Constance Markley. She was there, all right, briefly and quietly interred in ink. No one had got excited. No one had smelled anything, apparently, that couldn't eventually be fumigated in divorce court. I left the second morgue about noon and stopped for a steak sandwich and a beer on the way to my office. In the office, sitting, I elevated my feet and began to think.

Maybe thinking is an exaggeration. I didn't really have an idea. All I had was an itch, a tiny burr of coincidence that had caught in a wrinkle of my cortex. It didn't amount to much, but I thought I might as well worry it a while, having nothing else on hand or in mind, and what I thought I would do specifically was go back and see Faith Salem again, and I would go, if I could arrange it, when Faith and the sun were on the terrace. She had said to call ahead of time, and so I lowered my feet and reached for the phone, and that's when I saw the gorilla.

He was a handsome gorilla in a Brooks Brothers suit, but a gorilla just the same. There's something about the breed that you can't miss. They smell all right, and they look all right, and there's nothing you can isolate ordinarily as a unique physical characteristic that identifies one of them definitely as a gorilla rather than as a broker or a rich plumber, but they seem to have a chronic quality of deadliness that a broker or a plumber would have only infrequently, in special circumstances, if ever. This one was standing in the doorway watching me, and he had got there without a sound. He smiled. He was plainly prepared to treat me with all the courtesy I was prepared to make possible.

"Mr. Hand?' he said.

"That's right," I said.

"I have a message from Mr. Silas Lawler. He would appreciate it very much if you could come to

see him as soon as possible."

"I just went to see him yesterday."

"Mr. Lawler knows that. He regrets that he must inconvenience you again so soon. Apparently something important has come up."

"Something else important came up first. I was just getting ready to go out and take care of it."

"Mr. Lawler is certain that you'll prefer to give his business priority."

"Well, I'll tell you what to do. You go back to Mr. Lawler and tell him I'll be around this evening or first thing tomorrow."

"Mr. Lawler is most urgent that you come immediately. I have instructions to drive you there and bring you back. For your convenience, of course."

"Of course. Mr. Lawler is notoriously considerate. Suppose I don't want to go."

"Mr. Lawler hopes you will want to accommodate him."

"Let's suppose I refuse."

"Mr. Lawler didn't anticipate that contingency, I'm afraid. He said to bring you."

"Even if I resist?"

"As I understood my orders, Mr. Lawler made no qualifications."

"Do you think you're man enough to execute them without qualifications?"

"I think so."

"In that case," I said, "we'd better go."

I got my hat and put it over the place where the lumps would have been if I hadn't. Together, like cronies, we went downstairs and got into his car, which was a Caddy, and drove in it to Silas Lawler's restaurant plus. In the hall outside Silas Lawler's private room, we stood and listened to the piano, which was being played. What was being played on it this time was not something by Chopin, and I couldn't identify who it was by certainly, but I thought it was probably Mozart. The music was airy and intricate. It sounded as if it had been written by a man who felt very good and wanted everyone else to feel as good as he did.

"Mr. Lawler doesn't like to be interrupted when he's playing," the Brooks Brothers gorilla said.

"You can't be too careful with artists," I said. "They're touchy."

"Mr. Lawler's a virtuoso," he said.

He didn't even blink when he said it. It was obviously a word he was used to and not something special for effect. I wondered if they were granting degrees to gorillas these days, but I didn't think it would be wise to ask. There wouldn't have been time for an answer, anyhow, for the virtuoso stopped playing the music by Mozart, or at least not Chopin, and the gorilla knocked twice on the door and opened it, and I walked into the room ahead of him.

Silas Lawler got off the bench and walked around the curve of

the grand and stopped in the spot where the canary usually perches in nightclubs. He didn't perch, however. He merely leaned. From the same chair in which she had sat yesterday, Robin Robbins looked across at me with a poker face, and I could see at once, in spite of shadows and cosmetics, that somebody had hung one on her. A plum-colored bruise spread down from her left eye across the bone of her cheek. There was still some swelling of the flesh too, although it had certainly been reduced from what it surely had been. She looked rather cute, to tell the truth. The shiner somehow made her look like the kid she said she never was.

"How are you, Hand?" Lawler said. "It was kind of you to come."

"Your messenger was persuasive," I said. "I couldn't resist him."

"Darcy, you mean. I can always depend on Darcy to do a job like a gentleman. He dislikes violence almost as much as I do. I'm sure you didn't find him abusive."

"Not at all. I've never been threatened half so courteously before." I turned my head and looked down at Robin Robbins. "Apparently you weren't so lucky, honey. You must have run into an interior gorilla somewhere."

"I fell over my lip," she said.

Lawler laughed, and I could have sworn that there was a note of tenderness in it. "Robin's impetuous. She's always doing something she later regrets, and I'm always prepared to forgive her eventally, although I sometimes lose my temper in the meanwhile. Isn't that so, Robin?"

"Oh, sure," she said. "We love each other in spite of everything."

"I won't deny that Robin's been punished," Lawler said, "but I'm afraid I must charge you with being partially responsible, Hand. You ought to be ashamed of yourself for taking advantage of her innocence."

"I am," I said, "I truly am."

"Well," he said, "I don't think we need to be too critical. Robin, I realize, is even harder to resist than Darcy. For different reasons, of course. She's told me what the two of you talked about yesterday after leaving here together, and she understands now how foolish she was. Don't you, Robin?"

"Sure," she said. "I was foolish."

"She wants me to ask you to forget all about it, don't you, Robin?"

"Sure," she said. "Forget it."

"You see?" Lawler shrugged and shifted his weight against the piano. "Robin and I are really very compatible. We are never able to keep secrets from one another for very long."

"That's sweet," I said. "I'm touched."

He was looking directly at Robin for the first time now. "Wouldn't you like to apologize to Mr. Hand for causing him so much trouble, Robin?"

"I apologize, Mr. Hand, from

the bottom of my heart," she said.

"I liked it better when you told me to go to hell," I said.

Lawler stood erect and stopped looking at Robin in order to look at me. "That wasn't a very gracious response, Hand. However, let it pass. I also want to apologize to you."

"What for?"

"I'm afraid I was a little unreasonable yesterday. I understand now that you were hired to investigate the matter we discussed, and you're naturally concerned about your fee. I have no right to ask you to sacrifice that, of course. What do you think it will amount to?"

"That depends on how long the job lasts. I get twenty-five dollars a day and expenses."

"Very reasonable. I'll pay you five thousand dollars to drop the case. That should be adequate."

"Bribery?"

"Don't be offensive. Compensation for the loss of your fee."

"It's not enough."

"Really? I figure that it comes to two-hundred days' work. What do you think would be fair?"

"Make it a million, and I'll take it."

"Your joke isn't very funny, Hand. It's bad taste to joke about a serious matter."

"I'm not joking. You see, I've got to be compensated for more than the loss of a fee. I've got to be compensated for the loss of my integrity, such as it is. I don't figure a million's too much for that."

"Nonsense. You're wasting your time, anyhow. I assured you of that. Is it ethical to go on accepting a fee under false pretenses?"

"I explained to my client that it might not come to anything. Probably wouldn't, as a matter of fact. We're both satisfied."

"Perhaps I could persuade your client that he is making a mistake. Would you care to give me his name?"

"No, I wouldn't. The truth is, I don't particularly care for your methods of persuasion."

"No matter. If I really want to learn the identity of your client, I can do it easily enough. Now, however, I don't propose to discuss this matter with you any longer. I believe I've made you a fair proposition. Do you still refuse to accept it?"

"Sorry. I'm holding out for the million."

If there was the slightest sign between him and Darcy behind me, the lifting of a brow or the twitch of a tick, I never saw it. It could be, I guess, that they'd developed a kind of extra-sensory communication that functioned automatically when the time was precisely right. Anyhow, sign or not, Darcy grabbed me abruptly above the elbows from behind and wrenched my arms and shoulders back so violently that I thought for a moment I'd split down the middle

like a spring fryer. At the same instant, Lawler made a fist and stepped forward within range.

"I regret this, Hand," he said. "I really do."

"I know," I said. "You dislike violence. You and Darcy both."

"It's your own fault, of course. You're behaving like a recalcitrant boy, and it's necessary to teach you a lesson."

"Don't you think you ought to teach me somewhere else? You wouldn't want to get blood on this expensive carpet."

"It's acrilan. Haven't you heard of it? One of these new miracle fabrics. Blood wipes right off."

"Is that a fact? Better living through chemistry. I'm impressed."

He was tired now of the whole business. I could see in his face that he was tired, and I believe that he actually did regret what he considered the necessity of having to do what he was going to do. It was only that he knew no other way to fight, in spite of Chopin and Mozart and the veneer of respectability, than the way of violence. He wanted to get it over with, and he did. He drove the fist into my face, and it was like getting hit with a jagged boulder. Flesh split on bone, and bone cracked, and darkness welled up internally. I sagged, I guess, and hung by my arms from the hands of Darcy, and after a while, I guess, I straightened and lifted my head and was hit again in the face. When I opened my eyes after that, I was lying on the carpet, and there was blood on it. In my mouth there was more blood, and a thin and bitter fluid risen from my stomach. I was sick and in pain, but mostly I was ashamed. I got up slowly, in sections, and looked at Lawler through a pink mist.

"Your carpet's a mess," I said. "I hope you're right about acrilan."

"Don't worry about it," he said. "You're a tough guy, Hand, and I like you. If you think I get any kicks out of pushing you around, you're wrong. There's a lavatory in there. Through that door. Why don't you go in and wash your face?"

"I think I will," I said.

I went in and turned on the cold tap and caught double handfuls of water and buried my face in them. The water burned like acid, but it revived me and dispelled the pink fog. In the mirror above the lavatory, I saw that a cut on my cheekbone needed a stitch or two. I found some adhesive tape in the medicine cabinet and pulled the cut together and went back out into the other room.

Lawler was seated at the grand again. Darcy was leaning against the wall behind him. Robin Robbins, in her chair, was still wearing her poker face. I thought I saw in her eyes a guarded gleam of something appealing. Compassion? Camaraderie based on mutual beatings? A raincheck? Who could be

sure with Robin? I kept right on walking toward the door, and I was almost there when Lawler spoke to me.

"Hand," he said.

I stopped but didn't turn. I didn't answer either. It hurt to talk, and I saw no sense in it.

"One thing more," he said. "I made a reasonable offer, and you'd be wise to accept it. This is just a suggestion of what you'll get if you don't. I'll put a check for five thousand in the mail today. You'll get it tomorrow."

"Thanks very much," I said.

I started again and kept going and got on out of there.

7.

In a sidewalk telephone booth I dialed Faith Salem's number and got Maria.

"Miss Salem's apartment," she said.

"This is Percy Hand," I said. "Let me speak with Miss Salem."

"One moment, please," she said.

I waited a while. The open wire hummed in my ear. My head felt three times its normal size, and the hum was like a siren. I held the receiver a few inches away until Faith Salem's voice came on.

"Hello, Mr. Hand," she said.

"You said to call before I came," I said. "I'm calling."

"Is it something urgent?"

"I don't know how urgent it is. I know I just turned down five grand in a chunk for twenty-five dollars and expenses a day. Under the circumstances, I feel like being humored."

She was silent for ten seconds. The siren shattered my monstrous head.

"You sound angry," she said finally.

"Not at all," I said. "I'm an amiable boob who will take almost anything for anybody, and my heart holds nothing but love and tenderness for all of God's creatures."

Silence again. The siren again. Her voice again in due time.

"You'd better come up," she said. "I'll be expecting you."

"Fifteen minutes," I said.

When I got there, the sun was off the terrace, and so was she. She was waiting for me in the living room, and she was wearing a black silk jersey pullover blouse and black ballerina-type slippers and cream-colored capri pants. On her they looked very good, or she looked very good in them, whichever way you saw it. She was lying on her side, propped up on one elbow on a sofa about nine feet long, and she got up and came to meet me between the sofa and the door. I thought I heard her breath catch and hold for a second in her throat.

"Your face," she said.

"It must be a mess," I said.

"There's a stain on the front of your shirt," she said.

"Blood," I said. "Mine."

She reached up and touched gently with her finger tips the piece of adhesive that was holding together the lips of the cut that needed a stitch or two. The fingers moved slowly down over swollen flesh and seemed to draw away the pain by a kind of delicate anesthetization. It was much better than codeine or a handful of aspirin.

"Come and sit down," she said.

I did, and she did. We sat together on the nine foot sofa, and my right knee touched her left knee, and this might have been by accident or design, but in either event it was a pleasant situation that no one made any move to alter, certainly not I.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"So am I," I said. "I'm sorrier than anyone."

"Would you like to tell me about it?"

"It's hardly worth while. I took a job, and this turned out to be part of it."

"It's all my fault."

"Sure it is."

"But I don't understand. Why should anyone do this to you?"

"Someone wanted me to give up the job, and I didn't want to. We had a difference of opinion."

"Does that mean you've decided to go ahead with it?"

"That's what it means. At least for a while longer. When anyone wants so hard for me to quit doing something I'm doing, it makes me stubborn. I'm a contrary fellow by nature."

"You must be careful," she said.

She sounded as if it would really made a difference if I wasn't. She was sitting facing me, her left leg resting along the edge of the sofa and her right leg not touching the sofa at all, and she lifted her hand again and touched the battered side of my face as if she were reminding herself and me of the consequences of carelessness, and it seemed a natural completion of the gesture for her hand to slip on around my neck. Her arm followed, and her body came over against mine, and I was suddenly holding her and kissing her with bruised lips, and we got out of balance and toppled over gently and lay for maybe a minute in each other's arms with our mouths together. Then she drew and released a deep breath that quivered her toes. She sat up, stood up, looked down at me with a kind of incredulity in her eyes.

"I think I need a drink," she said. "You too."

"No gin and tonic, thanks," I said. "Straight bourbon."

"Agreed," she said.

She walked over to a cabinet to get it. I watched her go and watched her come. Her legs in the tight capri pants were long and lovely and worth watching. This was something she knew as well as I, and we were both happy about it. She handed me my bourbon in

a little frosted glass with the ounces marked on the outside in the frost, and the bourbon came up to the third mark. I drank it down a mark, leaving two to go, and she sat down beside me and drank a little less of hers.

"I liked kissing you, and I'm glad I did," she said, "but I won't do it again."

"All right," I said.

"Are you offended?"

"No."

"There's nothing personal in it, you understand."

"I understand."

"There are obvious reasons why I can't afford to."

"I know the reasons. What I'd like to do now, if you don't mind, is to quit talking about it. I came here to talk about something else, and it would probably be a good idea if we got started."

"What did you come to talk about?"

"About you and Constance Markley. When I was here before, you said you knew her in college. You said you shared an apartment that she paid the rent on. I neglected to ask you what college it was."

"Amity College."

"That's at Amity, of course."

"Yes. Of course."

"What was your name then?"

"The same as now. Faith Salem."

"You told me you'd been married a couple of times. I've been wondering about the Miss. Did you get your maiden name restored both times?"

"Not legally. When I'm compelled to be legal, I use another name. Would you believe that I'm a countess?"

"I'd believe it if you said it."

"Well, I don't say it often, because I'm not particularly proud of it. The count was attractive and quite entertaining for a while, but he turned out to be a mistake. I was in Europe with my first husband when I met him. You remember the publisher's son I married in college? That one. We were in Europe, and he'd turned out to be rather a mistake too, although not so bad a one as the count turned out later. Anyhow, I met the count and did things with him while my husband was doing things with someone else, and he was a very charming and convincing liar, and I decided it would probably be a smart move to make a change. It wasn't."

"Wasn't it profitable?"

"No. The amount of his income was one of the things the count lied about most convincingly. Are you being rather nasty about it, incidentally? I hope not. Being nasty doesn't suit you somehow."

"Excuse me. You'll have to remember that I've had a hard day. The publisher's son and the count are none of my business. At your request, Constance Markley is. I'd like to know exactly the nature of the relationship that caused you to

share an apartment at college."

"It was normal, if that's what you mean."

"It isn't." I lowered the bourbon to the first mark. My mouth was cut on the inside, and the bourbon burned in the cut. "I don't know just what I do mean. I don't even know exactly why I asked the question or what I'm trying to learn. Just tell me what you can about Constance."

She was silent, considering. Her consideration lasted about half a minute, and after it was finished, she took time before speaking to lower the level of her own bourbon, which required about half as long.

"It's rather embarrassing," she said.

"Come on," I said. "Embarrass yourself."

"Oh, well." She shrugged. "I liked Constance. I told you I did. But I wasn't utterly devoted to her. She was rather an uncomfortable girl to be around, to tell the truth. Very intense. Inclined to be possessive and jealous. She often resented the attention and time I gave to other people. At such times, she would be very difficult and demanding, then withdrawn and sullen, and finally almost pathetically repentent and eager to make everything right again. It was a kind of cycle that she repeated many times. Her expressions and gestures of affection made me feel uncomfortable. Not that there was the least sign of perversion in them, you understand. It was only that they were so exorbitant."

"Would you say that she admired you?"

"I guess so. I guess that's what it was."

"Well, I understand it isn't so unusual to find that kind of thing among school girls. Boys either, for that matter. Do you have anything left over from that time? Any snapshots or letters or anything like that?"

"It happens that I do. After you left the other day, I got to thinking about Constance, the time we were together, and I looked in an old case of odds and ends I'd picked up different times and places, the kind of stuff you accumulate and keep without any good reason, and there were this snapshot and a card among all the other things. They don't amount to much. Just a snapshot of the two of us together, a card she sent me during the Christmas holiday of that year. Would you like to see them?"

I said I would, and she went to get them. Why I wanted to see them was something I didn't know precisely. Why I was interested at all in this period of ancient history was something else I didn't know. It had some basis, I think, in the feeling that the thing that could make a person leave an established life without a trace was surely something that had existed and had been growing for a long time, not

something that had started yesterday or last week or even last year. Then there was, of course, the coincidence. Silas Lawler wanted this sleeping dog left lying, and once a month he went to the town where Constance Markley had once lived with Faith Salem, who wanted the dog wakened. It was that thin, that near to nothing, but it was all there was of anything at all.

Faith Salem returned with the snapshot and the Christmas card. I took them from her and finished my bourbon and looked first at the picture. I don't know if I would have seen in it what I did if I hadn't already heard about Constance Markley what I had. It's impossible to know how much of what we see, or think we see, is the result of suggestion. Constance and Faith were standing side by side. Constance was shorter, slighter of build, less striking in effect. Faith was looking directly into the camera, but Constance was looking around and up at the face of Faith. It seemed to me that her expression was one of adoration. This was what might have been no more than the result of suggestion. I don't know.

I took the Christmas card out of its envelope. It had clearly been expensive, as cards go, and had probably been selected with particular care. On the back, Constance Markley had written a note. It said how miserable and lonely she was at home, how the days were interminable, how she longed for the time to come when she could return to Amity and Faith. Christmas vacation, I thought, must have lasted all of two weeks. I read the note with ambivalence. I felt pity, and I felt irritation.

Faith Salem had finished her bourbon and was looking at me over the empty glass. Her eyes were clouded, and she shook her head slowly from side to side.

"I guess you've got an idea," she said.

"That's an exaggeration," I said.

"Why are you interested in all this? I don't understand."

"Maybe it's just that I'm naturally suspicious of a coincidence. Every time I come across one, I get curious."

"What coincidence?"

"Never mind. If I put it in words, I'd probably decide it sounded too weak to bother with. I'm driving to Amity tomorrow. The trip'll hike expenses. You'd better give me a hundred bucks."

"All right. I'll get it for you."

She got up and went out of the room again. I watched her out and stood up to watch her in. From both angles and both sides she still looked good. She handed me the hundred bucks, and I took it and shoved it in a pocket and put my arms around her and kissed her.

She had meant what she had said. She said she wouldn't kiss me again, and she didn't. She only

stood quietly and let me kiss her, which was different and not half so pleasant. I took my arms away and stepped back.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"So am I," she said.

Then we said good-by, and I left. Going, I met Graham Markley in the hall, coming. We spoke politely, and he asked me how the investigation was getting along. I said it was getting along all right. He didn't even seem curious about the condition of my face.

8.

I didn't get out of town the next day until ten o'clock. It was three hundred fifty miles by highway to Amity. In my old clunker, allowing time for a couple of stops, I did well to average forty miles an hour. Figure it for yourself. It was almost exactly eight and a half hours later when I got there. About six-thirty. I was tired and hungry, and I went to a hotel and registered and went up to my room. I washed and went back down to the coffee shop and got a steak and ate it and went back to the room. By then it was eight. I lit a cigarette and lay down on the bed and began to wonder seriously why I was here and what the hell I was going to do, now that I was.

I thought about a lot of things. I thought about Robin Robbins looking like a tough and lovely kid with her beautiful shiner. I thought about Faith Salem lying in the sun. I thought about Silas Lawler and Graham Markley and Regis Lawler and Constance Markley. The last pair were shadows. I couldn't see them, and I couldn't entirely believe in them, and I wished suddenly that I had never heard of them. I did this thinking about these people, but it didn't get me anywhere. I lay there on the bed in the hotel room for what seemed like an hour, and I was surprised, when I looked at my watch, to learn that less than half that time had passed. The room was oppressive, and I didn't want to stay there any longer. Getting up, I went downstairs and walked around the block and came back to the hotel and bought a newspaper at the tobacco counter and sat down to read it. I read some of the front page and some of the sports page and all the comics and started on the classified ads.

Classified ads interest me. I always read them in the newspapers and in the backs of magazines that publish them. They are filled with the gains and losses and inferred intimacies of classified lives. If you are inclined to be a romantic, you can, by a kind of imaginative interpolation, read a lot of pathos and human interest into them. Someone in Amity, for instance, had lost a dog, and someone wanted to sell a bicycle that was probably once the heart of the life of some kid, and someone named

Martha promised to forgive someone named Walter if he would come back from wherever he'd gone. *Someone named Faith Salem wanted to teach you to play the piano for two dollars an hour.*

There it was, and that's the way it sometimes happens. You follow an impulse over three hundred miles because of a thin coincidence, and right away, because of a mild idiosyncrasy, you run into another coincidence that's just a little too much of one to be one, and the first one, although you don't know why, no longer seems like one either.

I closed my eyes and tried to see Faith Salem lying again in the sun, but I couldn't. I couldn't see her lying in the sun because she was in another town teaching piano lessons for two dollars an hour. It said so in the town's newspaper. I opened my eyes and looked again, just to be certain, and it did. Piano lessons, it said. 1828 Canterbury Street, call LO 3314, it said. Faith Salem, it said.

I stood up and folded the newspaper and stuck it in my coat pocket and looked at my watch. The watch said nine. I walked outside and started across the street to the parking lot where I'd left my car, but then, because it was getting late and I didn't know the streets of the town, I turned and came back to the curb in front of the hotel and caught a taxi. I gave the driver the address, 1828 Canterbury Street, and sat back in the seat. The driver repeated the address after me and then concentrated silently on his driving. I didn't try to think or make any guesses. I sat and listened to the ticking of the meter that seemed to be measuring the diminishing time and distance between me and something.

We hit Canterbury Street at 6th and went down it twelve blocks. It was an ordinary residential street, paved with asphalt, with the ordinary variations in quality you will find on most streets in most towns. It started bad and got better and then started getting worse, but it never got really good or as bad in the end as it had started. 1828 was a small white frame house with a fairly deep front lawn and vacant lots between it and the houses on both sides, which were also small and white and frame with fairly deep front lawns. On the corner at the end of the block was a neighborhood drug store with a vertical neon sign above the entrance. It would be a place to call another taxi in case of necessity, and so I paid off the one I had and let it go. I got out and went up a brick walk and across a porch. There was a light showing at a window, but I heard no sound and saw no shadow on the blind. After listening and watching for perhaps a minute, I knocked and waited for perhaps half of another.

Without any prelude of sound

whatever, the door opened and a woman stood looking out at me. The light behind her left her face in shadow. She was rather short and very slim, almost fragile, and her voice, when she spoke, had an odd quality of detached airiness, as if it had no corporeal source.

"Yes?" she said.

"I'm looking for Miss Faith Salem," I said.

"I'm Faith Salem. What is it you want?"

"Please excuse me for calling so late, but I was unable to get here earlier. My name is Percival Hand. You were referred to me as an excellent teacher."

"Thank you. Are you studying piano, Mr. Hand?"

"No." I laughed. "My daughter is the student. We're new in town, and she needs a teacher. As I said, you were recommended. May I come in and discuss it with you?"

"Yes, of course. Please come in."

I stepped past her into a small living room that was softly lighted by a table lamp and a floor lamp. On the floor was a rose-colored rug with an embossed pattern. The furniture was covered with bright chintz or polished cotton, and the windows were framed on three sides by panels and valences of the same color and kind of material. At the far end of the room, which was no farther than a few steps, a baby grand occupied all the space of a corner. Behind me, the woman who called herself Faith Salem closed the door. She came past me into the room and sat down in a chair beside the step-table on which the table lamp was standing. It was apparently the chair in which she had been sitting when I knocked, for a cigarette was burning in a tray on the table and an open book was lying face down beside the tray. The light from the lamp seemed to gather in her face and in the hands she folded in the lap. The hands were quiet, holding each other. The face was thin and pretty and perfectly reposed. I have never seen a more serene face than the face of Constance Markley at that moment.

"Sit down, Mr. Hand," she said.

I did. I sat in a chair opposite her and held my hat on my knees and had the strange and inappropriate feeling of a visiting minister. I felt, anyhow, the way the minister always appeared to be feeling when he called on my mother a hundred years ago when I was home.

"What a charming room," I said.

"Thank you." She smiled and nodded. "I like bright colors. They make a place so cheerful. Did you say you are new in Amity, Mr. Hand?"

"Yes. We just arrived recently."

"I see. Do you plan to make your home here permanently?"

"I don't know. It depends on how things work out, Miss Salem. Is that correct? I seem to remember that you're single."

"That's quite correct. I've never

married," she said, and nodded.

"I'm surprised that such a lovely woman has escaped so long. Do you live here alone?"

In her face for a moment was an amused expression that did not disturb the basic serenity, and I wondered if it was prompted by the trite compliment or the impertinent question. At any rate, she ignored the first and answered the second simply.

"Yes. I'm quite alone here. I like living alone."

"Have you lived in Amity long?"

"Many years. I came here as a student in the college and never left. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else."

"Forgive my asking, but don't you find it difficult to live by giving private music lessons?"

"I'm certain that I should if I tried it. I give private lessons only in my off hours. Evenings and weekends. I'm also an instructor in the Amity Conservatory. A private school." She hesitated, looking at me levelly across the short space between us, and I thought that she was now slightly disturbed, for the first time, by my irrelevant questions. "I understand that you should want to make inquiries of a teacher you are considering for your child, Mr. Hand, but yours don't seem very pertinent. Would you like to know something about my training and qualifications?"

"No, thanks. I'm sure you're very competent, Miss Salem. I'm sorry if my questions seemed out of line. The truth is, I know so little about music myself that I hardly know what to talk about."

"Do you mind telling me who sent you to me, Mr. Hand?"

"As a matter of fact, it was the Conservatory. They recommended you highly, but they didn't mention that you were an instructor there."

"I see. Many students are directed to me that way. The ones who are unable to attend the Conservatory itself, that is."

I looked down at my hat, turning it slowly in my hands, and I didn't like the way I was beginning to feel. No one could accuse me fairly of being a particularly sensitive guy, and ordinarily I am conscious of no corruption in the dubious practices of my trade, dubious practices being by no means restricted to the trade I happen to follow. By now I was beginning to feel somehow unclean, and every little lie was assuming in my mind the character of a monstrous deception. I was suddenly sick of it and wanted to be finished with it, the whole phony case. I had been hired for twenty-five and expenses to find a woman who had disappeared two years ago, and here she was in a town called Amity, living quietly under the name of Faith Salem, which was the name of the woman who had hired me to find her, and it had all been so fantastically quick and easy, a coincidence

and an itch and a classified ad, and now there seemed to be nothing more to be done that I had been hired to do.

But where was Regis Lawler? Here was Constance, but where was Regis? Well, I had not been hired to find Regis. I had been hired to find Constance, and I had found her, and that was all of it. Almost all of it, anyhow. All that was left to do for my money to get up and get away quietly with my unclean feeling after my necessary deceptions. Tomorrow I would drive back where I had come from, and I would report what I had learned to the woman who was paying me, and then she would know as much as I did, and what she wanted to do with it was her business and not mine.

There were still, however, so many loose ends. So many mental itches I couldn't scratch. I did not know why Constance had come to Amity. Nor why she had assumed the name of Faith Salem. Nor certainly why, for that matter, the real Faith Salem wanted her found. Nor why Silas Lawler did not. Nor where in the world was Regis Lawler. Nor if, in fact, he was. In the world, that is.

Suddenly I looked up and said, *"Mrs. Markley, where is Regis Lawler?"*

Her expression was queer. It was an expression I remembered for a long time afterward and sometimes saw in the black shag end of the kind of night when a man is vulnerable and cannot sleep. She stared at me for a minute with wide eyes in which there was a creeping dumb pain, and then, in an instant, there was a counter expression which seemed to be a denial of the pain and the pain's cause. Her lids dropped slowly, as if she were all at once very tired. Sitting there with her hands folded in her lap, she looked as if she were praying, and when she opened her eyes again, the expressions of pain and its denial were gone, and there was nothing where they had been but puzzlement.

"What did you call me?" she said.

"Mrs. Markley. Constance Markley."

"If this is a joke, Mr. Hand, it's in very bad taste."

"It's no joke. Your name is Constance Markley, and I asked you where Regis Lawler is."

"I don't know Constance Markley. Nor Regis Lawler." She unfolded her hands and stood up, and she was not angry and apparently no longer puzzled. She had withdrawn behind an impenetrable defense of serenity. "I don't know you either, Mr. Hand. Whoever you are and whatever you came here for, you are obviously not what you represented yourself to be, and you didn't come for the purpose you claimed."

"True. I'm not, and I didn't."

"In that case, we have nothing

more to discuss. If you will leave quietly, I'll be happy to forget that you ever came."

I did as she suggested. I left quietly. She had said that I was in bad taste, and I guess I was, for the taste was in my mouth, and it was bad.

I turned left at the street toward the drug store on the corner, and I had walked about fifty feet in that direction when a man got out of a parked car and crossed the parking to intercept me, and the car was a Caddy I had ridden in before, and the man was Silas Lawler.

"Surprised?" he said amiably.

"Not especially," I said. "I heard you've been coming out here pretty regularly the last couple years."

"I was afraid that might have been one of the things you heard. Robin has a bad habit of knowing things she's not supposed to. Not that it matters much. You've just made me make an extra trip, that's all. Darcy's really annoyed, though. He's the one who's had to tail you since you got into this business, and Darcy doesn't like that kind of work. He figures it's degrading."

"Poor Darcy. I'll have to apologize the next time I see him."

"That could be right now. Just turn your head a little. He's sitting over there behind the wheel of the Caddy."

"I'll have to do it some other time. Right now I'm on my way to the corner to call a cab."

"Forget it. Darcy and I wouldn't think of letting you go to all that trouble. We've been waiting all this time just to give you a lift."

"I hope you won't be offended if I decline."

"I'm afraid I would. I'm sensitive that way. I always take it personally if my hospitality's refused. You wouldn't want to hurt my feelings, would you?"

"I wouldn't mind."

"That's not very gracious of you, Hand. I offer you a lift, the least you can do is be courteous about it. What I mean is, get in the Caddy."

"No, thanks. The last time we got together, you didn't behave very well. I don't think I want to associate with you any more."

"It won't be for long."

He took a gun out of his pocket and pointed it at me casually in such a way that it would, if it fired, shoot me casually through the head. I could see, in a glimmer of light, the ugly projection of a silencer.

"Now who's not being gracious?" I said. "It seems to me a guy with any pride wouldn't want to force an invitation on someone."

"Oh, I won't force it. You don't want a lift, have it your own way. I'd just as soon kill you here."

"Wouldn't that be rather risky?"

"I don't think so. Odds are no one will hear anything. You probably wouldn't even be found for a

while. Anyhow, I'm not here. I'm in my room at the restaurant. So's Darcy. If it got to be necessary, which it probably wouldn't, we could find a half dozen guests who are with us."

I thought about it and decided that he could. Maybe even a full dozen. And so, after thinking, I conceded.

"I believe you could," I said, "and I've decided to accept the lift after all."

"Thanks," he said. "I appreciate it."

I crossed the parking to the Caddy, and while I was crossing, Darcy reached back from the front seat and unlatched the door, which swung open, and I got in like a paying passenger, with no effort, and Silas Lawler got in after me and closed the door behind him.

"Good evening, Mr. Hand," Darcy said.

"I'm beginning to doubt it," I said.

He laughed softly and politely and slid under the wheel of the Caddy and started the engine and occupied himself with driving. He drove at a moderate rate of speed, with careful consideration of traffic regulations, and where he drove was out of town on a highway and off the highway onto a country road. I admired the erect and reliable look of the back of his head. He looked from the rear exactly like a man whose vocabulary included virtuoso.

"You're a very stubborn guy, Hand," Silas Lawler said. "You simply won't take advice."

"It's a fault," I said. "All my life I've been getting into trouble because of it."

"You're through with that," he said. "This is the last trouble you'll ever get into."

This was not merely something he was saying. It was something he meant. I began trying to think of some way to change his mind, but I couldn't, and so I began trying then to think of some way to get out of the Caddy and off in some dark field with a sporting chance, but I couldn't think of that either. In the meanwhile, Darcy drove most of another mile and down a slope and across a culvert, and it was pitch dark down there in the little hollow where the culvert was. Silas Lawler leaned forward slightly and told him to stop the Caddy and turn off its lights, and Darcy did. The window beside Darcy was down, and I could hear clearly the infinite variety of little night sounds in the hollow and fields and all around.

"It's a nice night to die." I said.

Lawler sighed. He really did. A long soft sibilant sound with weariness in it.

"I'm sorry, Hand. I rather like you, as I've said before, and I wish you hadn't made this necessary."

"I fail to see the necessity," I said.

"That's because you don't know enough about something you know too much about."

"Is that supposed to make sense?"

"It is, and it does."

"Excuse me for being obtuse. I don't know much of anything about anything that I can see. I know that Constance Markley is alive, and to teach piano lessons, in Amity at two bucks per. I know she's calling herself Faith Salem. So what? She's got a right to be alive and teaching piano lessons and what she calls herself is her business. I was hired to find her, and I found her. That's a capital offense?"

"Murder is. Murder's capital almost everywhere."

"You've got the wrong guy. I haven't committed any murder."

"I know you haven't," he said. "But Constance has."

I sat and listened to the sounds of the night from the hollow and fields and all around. For a few moments they were thunderously amplified and gathered in my head, and then they faded in an instant to their proper dimensions and places.

So that's where Regis is, I thought. *Regis is where I almost am.*

And I said, "I don't know anything about that. I haven't got a shred of evidence."

"Sorry." He shook his head and took his gun out of his pocket again. "You know where Constance is, and that's enough. You'll tell the client who hired you, and your client will tell others, and the cops will know. Everyone thinks she and Regis ran away together, and when they learn that Regis isn't with her and hasn't ever been, they'll wonder where he is, and he's dead. It wouldn't take them long to find that out. She couldn't hold out against them for an hour. So you see? So you know too much to be trusted. So you've got to die. I'm glad for your sake that it's a nice night for it."

I didn't try to convince him that I'd swap silence for life. The risk in a deal like that would have been all his, and he was too good a gambler to consider it. I sat and listened some more to the sounds in the nice night to die, and I was thinking pretty clearly and understanding a number of things, but there were some other things I wanted to understand and didn't, and they were things that Silas Lawler could explain. Moreover, the longer we talked, the long I lived, and this was important to me, if not to him.

"All right," I said. "Constance killed Regis, and for some reason you want her to get away with it. Why? After all, Regis was your brother."

"Foster brother."

"Okay. Foster brother. It's still in the family."

"Regis was no damn good. Dying was the best thing he ever did,

and he had to have help to do that. He wasn't fit to touch Constance, let alone sleep with her, and why she ever loved him is something I'll never understand. But she did. She loved him, and she killed him."

"It sounds paradoxical, but it's possible. It wouldn't make her the first woman to kill a man she loved. Anyhow, I'm beginning to get a picture. You're on her side, maybe because you both play the piano, and you helped her get away after she killed Regis. I'm guessing that you disposed of the body too, and that poses a puzzle I've been trying to figure. No body, no murder. Why should Constance run? And why, since she did, only to Amity? With your collusion, which she had, why not to Shangri-La or somewhere?"

He stared past me out the window into the audible night, and he seemed to be considering carefully the questions I'd asked, and after a while he sighed again, the sibilant weariness with the job he had to do, or thought he had to do. Either way, unless I could prevent it, it would come to the same end for me.

"I guess it won't hurt to tell you," he said. "It'll take a little time, but I've got plenty, and you've got practically none, and maybe it won't hurt to allow you a little more."

"Thanks," I said. "That's generous of you."

"Don't mention it. And you'd better listen close because I'm only going over it once lightly. The night it happened, I went up to Regis's apartment to see him about something personal. I punched the bell a couple times, but no one answered, so I tried the door, and it wasn't locked. I went in, and there they were. Regis on the floor and Constance in a chair. Regis was dead, and she was gone. What I mean, she was in a state of shock. She was paying no more attention to Regis than if he'd just lain down for a nap. She hardly seemed aware that I'd come into the room. I checked Regis and saw that he'd been shot neatly between the eyes. She just sat there and watched me without moving or saying a word, her eyes as big and bright and dry as the eyes of an owl. I asked her what had happened, but she only shook her head and said she didn't understand. She said she was confused and couldn't seem to get things clear in her mind. I wanted to help her, and I held her hands and kept talking to her, trying to get her to remember, but even a dumb guy like me could see pretty soon that it wasn't any use. She was gone, not home, and it wasn't any act. She kept insisting she didn't understand. She didn't understand where she was, or why, or who Regis was, or I was, or a damn thing about anything. She said her name was Faith Salem. She said she lived in Amity. She said she just wanted to go home.

"That's the way it was. Whatever I did to help her, I had to do blind. So it was a big chance. So I was an accessory after the act. To hell with all that. What I finally did, I took her to my room at the restaurant and made her promise to stay there, and then I got Darcy and went back for Regis. Darcy's a guy I trust. Maybe the only guy. We got the body out of the building the back way between us. I've got a place in the country I sometimes go to, and we took Regis there, and Darcy put him in a good deep hole in the ground with a lot of quick lime, and I went back to the restaurant, and that was all for Regis. It was good enough. I haven't lost any sleep because of Regis."

He said all this quietly and easily, without the slightest trace of anger or excitement. He said it in exactly the same manner in which he would kill me in a little while, in his own time when he was good and ready, and I sat and waited for him to finish the story, whatever was left of it, and I had a strange and strong sense of revelation, a kind of gathering of loose ends in an obscure pattern.

"She wasn't there," he said. "She had simply walked out of the restaurant and was gone. I went looking for her. I beat the whole damn city, but I never found her. It was two weeks later before I saw her again. I remembered what she'd called herself: Faith Salem. I remembered where she'd said she lived: Amity. I went to Amity and tried to find her, but she wasn't there, and so I waited and kept looking, and finally she came. About two weeks later. I don't know where she'd been in the meanwhile, or how she got there, but she was dressed differently, in a plain suit, and she seemed to be in perfectly good condition. She'd had money in her purse the night she left. I know because I checked. Almost seven hundred dollars. Anyhow, I let her alone and kept watching after her, the same as I've done ever since, waiting to see what she'd do. What she did was rent that little house she lives in and start giving piano lessons.

"She advertised. She called herself Faith Salem. She got along all right, and finally she started teaching at a private conservatory. The point is, she wasn't acting or consciously hiding. *She really thought she was someone named Faith Salem.* I'm pretty ignorant about such things, but I did some reading and fished a little information out of a medico who had a debt in the game rooms, and finally I got an understanding of it. She was in a kind of condition that's called a fugue. Same name as a kind of musical composition. Unless something happened to shock her out of it, she might go on in this condition for years. Maybe the rest of her life. I figured it was safer for her to leave her as she was. As long

as she was in the fugue state, she'd act perfectly normal in the identity she'd assumed and would never give herself away.

"There were obvious dangers, of course. The thing I worried most about was that she'd come out of the fugue. She wouldn't remember anything since the murder, because the fugue period is entirely forgotten after recovery, but the murder was before the fugue, and she'd remember it as the last thing that happened to her, and if I wasn't around to help her then, she'd be done for. God knows what she'd do. So I've been keeping watch over her the best I can, and everything's been all right, except now you've come along and made like a God-damn detective, and I've got to kill you, and now's the time for it."

That was Darcy's cue. He got out of the front seat and opened the door to the back seat on my side, and I was supposed to get out quietly into the road to save the cushions, but I didn't want to do it. What I wanted to do was live, and in the growing sense of revelation and gathering ends, I thought I could see a faint chance.

"You're making a mistake," I said, "and if you go ahead and finish making it, it won't be your first, but it may very well be your last and worst."

Darcy stood erect by the open door and waited patiently and politely. Silas Lawler made an abrupt gesture with his gun and then became utterly still and silent for the longest several seconds there have ever been. Finally he sighed, and the tension went out of him.

"All right," he said. "Another minute or two. What mistake?"

"Assuming that Constance Markley killed Regis Lawler," I said.

"She was in the room with him. He was dead."

"Conceded. But you said you checked her purse and saw seven hundred dollars. Did you see a gun?"

"No. No gun."

"Was it in the room? Anywhere in the apartment?"

"No."

"You think maybe she shot him with her finger?"

"I've wondered about that. You explain it."

"I already have. She didn't shoot him."

"You're just guessting."

"Maybe so. But I've got better reasons for my guess than you've got for yours. You think she went off the deep end and killed him because he was getting tired of her. Is that it?"

"She'd had troubles. Things had piled up. Regis was more than a lover. He was a kind of salvation."

"I'll tell you something I've learned. The night Regis died, Constance Markley's maid helped her dress. According to this maid, she was eager. She wasn't angry or depressed or particularly disturbed

in any way. She was only eager to see her lover. Does that sound like a woman betrayed and ready to kill? It sounds to me more like a woman who was still ignorant of whatever defections her lover was committing."

"Say she was ignorant. She learned after she got there."

"Sure. And shot him with her finger."

Again, for the time it took to draw and release a long breath, Silas Lawler was silent. At the open door, Darcy shifted his weight with a grating of gravel.

"You got anything else to say?" Lawler said.

"Only what you're already thinking," I said. "Constance Markley didn't kill Regis. Neither did you. *But someone did*. Pretend for a minute that it *was* you. You murdered a man, and the night of the murder the man's mistress vanishes. No one knows where she went. No one knows why. In your mind these two things, the murder and the disappearance, are inevitably associated. It's too big a coincidence. There must be a connection. But what is it? Does she know something that may be placing you in jeopardy every second of your life? Or every second of hers? You must learn this at any cost, and you must learn it before anyone else. You may pretend indifference, but in your mind are the constant uncertainty, the constant fear. They're there for two long years. Then a garden variety private detective stumbles onto something. Maybe. He makes a trip to a town named Amity where the vanished mistress once lived with the same woman who has hired the detective to find her. Several people, in one way or another, learn of this trip. Including you, the murderer. What do these people do? They stay at home and mind their own business. Except you, the murderer. You don't stay home and mind your own business, because your business is in Amity."

That was all I had. It wasn't much, but it was all, and I had a strong conviction that it was true. Silas Lawler was still, and so was Darcy. In the stillness, like a living and measurable organism, was a growing sense of compelling urgency. I could hear it at last in Lawler's voice when he spoke again.

"Darcy," he said, "let's go back."

Darcy got under the wheel, and we turned and went. We went as fast as the Caddy's horses could run on the road and highway and streets they had to follow. On Canterbury Street, in front of the small frame house in which Constance Markley lived, Silas Lawler and I got out on the parking and looked up across the lawn to the house, and the light was still on the blind behind the window, and everything was quiet. Then, after a terrible interval in which urgency was slowly becoming farce, there was a

shadow on the blind that was not a woman's, a scream in the house that was.

The scream was not loud, not long, and there was no shadow and no sound by the time Lawler and I reached the porch. I was faster than he, running on longer legs, and he was a step behind me when I threw open the door to see Constance Markley hanging by the neck from the hands of her husband.

Interrupted in murder, he turned his face toward us in the precise instant that Lawler fired, and in another instant he was dead.

Constance Markley began to scream again.

She screamed and screamed and screamed.

I had a notion that the screams were two years old.

10.

I took a week to get things cleared up. I stayed in Amity that week, and then I went home, and the day after I went home, I went up to the apartment of Faith Salem. I made a point of going when the sun was on the terrace. Maria let me in, and I crossed the acres of pile and tile and went out where Faith was. She was lying on her back on the bright soft pad with one forearm across her eyes to shade them from the light. She didn't move the arm when I came out.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hand," she said.

"Good afternoon," I said.

"Excuse me for not getting up. Will you please sit down?"

"It's all right," I said. "Thanks."

I sat down in a wicker chair. It was very warm on the terrace in the sun, but the warmth was pleasant, and after a while I began to feel it in my bones. Faith Salem's lean brown body remained motionless, except for the barely perceptible rise and fall of her breasts in breathing, and I suspected that her eyes were closed under her arm.

"So it was Graham after all," she said.

"That's what you suspected, wasn't it?"

"In a way. I had a feeling, but it was a feeling that he had done something to Constance. I can't understand why he killed this man."

"Not because of the affair. He didn't care about that."

"Why, then?"

"Regis Lawler tried to blackmail him. It went back to something that happened several years ago. Graham Markley and Constance were driving back from the country. They'd been on a party, and Graham was drunk. He hit a woman on the highway and killed her and kept right on driving. It was a nasty business. Constance isn't a strong person, nor even a very pleasant person, and she agreed with Graham that it was

better to keep quiet about the incident. It's easy for some people to rationalize that kind of attitude. Then, in due time, after the death of her child, she met Regis Lawler, and she wanted to do with Regis just what everyone actually assumed she had done. She wanted to run away from everything—her marriage, her guilt, everything associated with her child's death, all the unhappiness that people like her seem doomed to accumulate.

"Apparently Regis let her believe that he might be willing to go along with this, but he had no money. Silas Lawler told me that Regis stole seventy-five grand from a wall safe at the restaurant, but it wasn't so. It was only a lie Silas used to make their running away plausible. What really happened was that Constance told Regis about the woman's death on the highway, and Regis tried the blackmail, although he actually had no intention, it seems, of going anywhere at all with Constance. The blackmail didn't work. Graham Markley wasn't the kind of weak character to submit. He went to Lawler's apartment and killed him. When Constance went there later the same night and found his body, she knew immediately what had surely happened. Her own burden of guilt was too heavy to bear in addition to everything else, and so she escaped it by becoming someone else to whom none of this had ever happened. It was something that could only have happened under certain conditions to a certain kind of person. She became the one woman she had known that she completely admired and envied, and she went back to the place where she had, for a while, been happier than she had ever been before or since. She became you, and she went back to Amity. With a break or two and a couple of hunches, I got the idea that she might be there, and I went there to see if I could find her, and Graham Markley learned from you where I was going. He was terribly afraid of what Constance might know to tell if she was found, and it was imperative, as he saw it, to get rid of her for good and all. And so he followed me and found her and tried to kill her, but it didn't turn out that way."

"I'm sorry I told him," she said. "It was a mistake."

"Not for me," I said. "It made me a smart guy instead of a corpse."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing," I said. "It's not important."

The sun in the sky was nearing the tooled ridge of stone. I wished for a drink, but nobody brought one. Faith Salem's breasts rose and fell, rose and fell. Her long brown legs stirred slightly in the sun.

"Did Constance tell all this?" she said.

"The part about the murder. Not the rest."

"How strange it is. How strange

simply to forget everything and become someone else."

"Strange enough, but not incredible. It's happened before. People have gone half around the world and lived undetected in new identities for years."

"Is she all right now?"

"She remembers who she is and everything that happened until she found the body of Regis Lawler in his apartment. She doesn't remember anything that happened in the time of the fugue. That's a long way from all right, I guess, but it's as good as she can hope for."

"Why become me? Why me of all people?"

There was honest wonderment in her voice. Looking at her, the lean brown length of her, I could have told her why, but I didn't. I had a feeling that it was time to be going, and I stood up.

"I think I'd better leave now," I said.

"Yes," she said. "I think so."

"I'll send you a bill."

"Of course. I'll be here as long as the rent's paid. That's about three months."

"Are you going to look at me before I leave?"

"No. I don't think so. Do you mind letting yourself out?"

"I don't mind."

"Good-by, then, Mr. Hand. I wish you had a lot of money. It's a shame you're so poor."

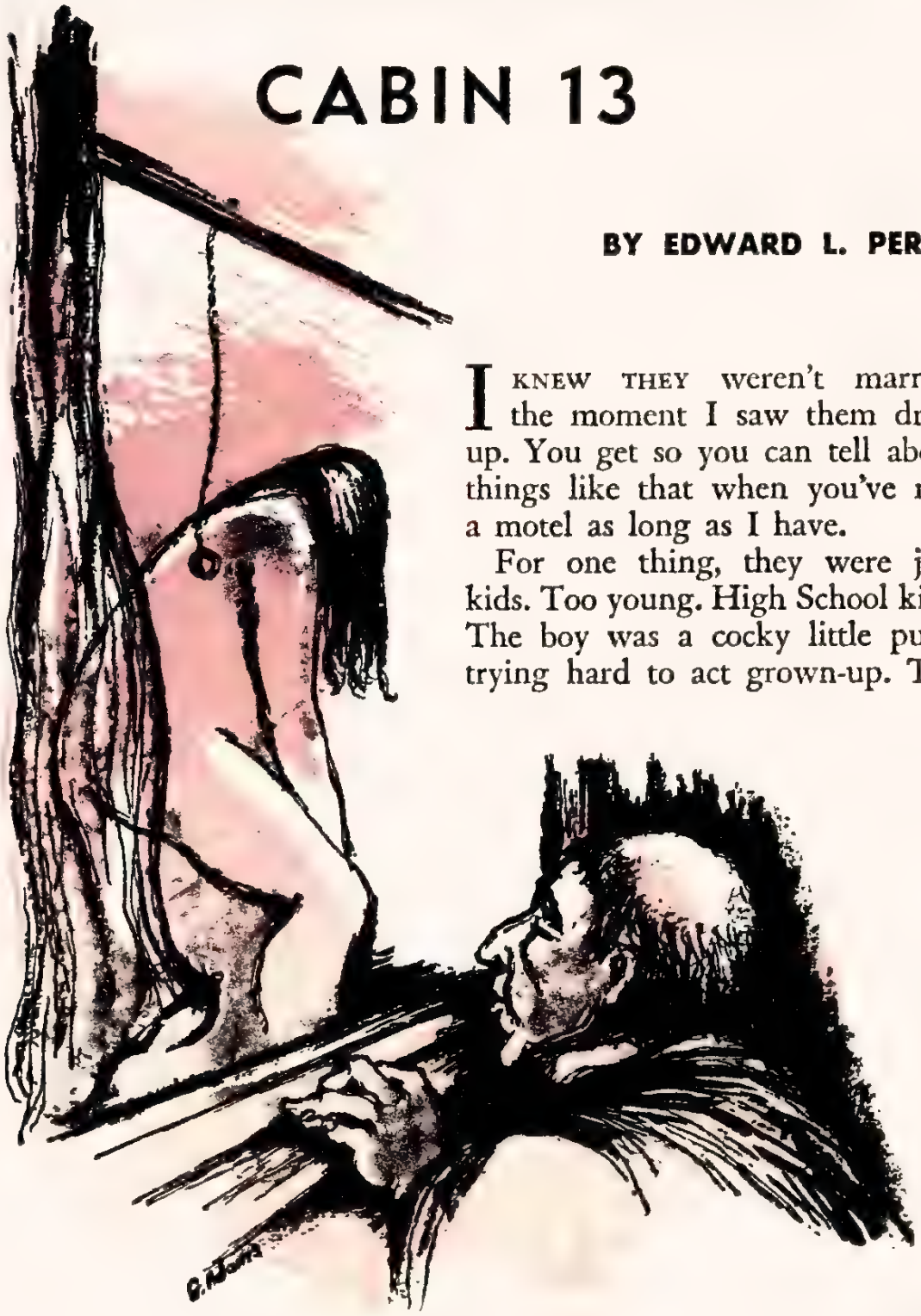
"Yes, it is," I said. "It's a crying shame."

She never moved or looked at me, and I went away. The next day I sent her a bill, and two days after that I got a check. I saw her twice again, but not to speak to. Once she was coming out of a shop alone, and once she was going into a theater on the arm of a man. I learned later that she married a very rich brewer and went to live in Milwaukee.

"So I rent the cabins cheap and don't ask no questions. What do I care, I get a hundred bucks apiece for the films."

CABIN 13

BY EDWARD L. PERRY



I KNEW THEY weren't married the moment I saw them drive up. You get so you can tell about things like that when you've run a motel as long as I have.

For one thing, they were just kids. Too young. High School kids. The boy was a cocky little punk trying hard to act grown-up. The

girl stayed in the car, but I could see that she was a small blonde. I knew they're out for a fling, but what the hell? Their money is as good as anybody's. Besides, they were both clean-cut teen-agers, and I could make more money out of giving them a cabin than they'd ever know.

The punk took out a cigarette and sized me up. My looks gave him courage to go through with what was on his mind. I knew what he was thinking. I'm harmless. Just a one-eyed, rat-like little guy who couldn't give a boy his size any trouble. He couldn't possibly guess what my thoughts are. I was glad he couldn't. He might have gotten rough.

"How about a cabin for the night, Mac?" he said.

"You and that girl married?"

"Sure—sure we are."

"O.K. here, sign, the book." I flipped the register book towards him, and he scribbled "Mr. and Mrs. John Smith" in it. Hell, the punk couldn't even think up an original name.

Half of my ledgers are filled with the name of Mr. and Mrs. John Smith.

"That'll be a fin," I said.

"That's kind of high, isn't it?"

"That's the price of my cabins. Take it or leave it."

He took it, like I knew he would. He was so young-looking no other motel owner would have put them up for the night.

"You got any luggage?" I asked.

"Nope—me and my wife are traveling light."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

He gave me a dirty look, but to hell with him. I should have charged double for allowing them to shack up in my place. After all, a man can get into plenty of trouble if the cops ever got wise. But even at that, I knew I'd come out ahead. I mean, besides the fin I get for the cabin, Leo will pay me one hundred dollars for the films.

That was my lucky night. I assigned the teen-agers to cabin 12, and I already had a red haired Venus in cabin 14. I'm filled up, all except number 13, and brother, I don't *ever* rent that cabin! I'd be ruined if I did.

The motel is built in a horseshoe shape, with cabins built together in a solid unit, and I followed the couple to Number 14. I couldn't help but notice the way the young girl's hips moved under the tight material of her skirt. Man, she was a doll! I noticed the light was on in Number 12, and I got to thinking about the red head.

She was a beauty with more curves than a West Virginia highway. She'd checked in earlier in the night and had left strict orders that she didn't want to be disturbed, and I wondered idly if she was meeting some joker later in the night. Not that I cared. I was just curious.

I've got a sweet little set-up here. I don't get rich renting my cabins to young punks and their skirts, but since I fixed up Cabin 13, I've had a steady income on the side.

Leo runs the pool-room in town, and he handles all my stuff. He's a big, mean slob who is always having trouble with his wife. He beats hell out of her, and so she keeps running away. He goes after her and brings her back. He's jealous to the point of being insane about it, and swears his wife keeps running off to see another man. God, I pity the poor sucker if Leo ever gets his hands on him. Leo would kill him!

It was Leo's talk that first gave me the idea of fixing up Cabin 13, only he never knew it. I was down at the pool-room one day, and he was talking about magazines.

"What I need is some good magazines showing nudes," he said reflectingly, "The guys really eat that stuff up. Only thing is the law won't let the editors go but so far. Why, I knew a feller who use to handle them books—you know the kind of stuff I mean—well, he really cleaned up."

"Well, I like to look at them myself." I said.

"Everybody does. I got guys coming up to me all the time asking if I've got any "French" stuff to sell. I could make a killing if I did."

I'd been thinking all the time he was talking, so I said;

"Suppose I could supply you with some. How much would you pay?"

His eyes narrowed with interest. "I don't know. You got some contacts?"

"No—I was figuring on taking the pictures myself." He laughed then. "Why in hell would a dame pose for a little one-eyed runt like you?"

"You want to handle my stuff, or not?" I asked.

"Sure—hell, yes. Only I don't think you'll come across."

"How much will you pay for—say a reel of sixteen millimeter film?"

"Twenty-five bucks."

"Make it a hundred, and we do business."

"A hundred! You crazy or something?"

"Not crazy, Leo. I just know what kind of prices that material brings on the market."

"Allright—allright, you deliver the goods, and I'll pay the price you ask."

And that's how I got into business. I fixed up cabin 13 the way I wanted it. I put in a couple of those two-way mirrors in the adjoining cabins, and while a woman was looking at herself in the mirror on one side of the wall, I was looking right back at her. Only, she didn't know it. I took some good footage that ended up in the stag parties Leo threw in the back of the pool-room.

I really got a rep after that. Leo and the boys assumed the dames

posed for me willingly, and I didn't tell 'em different.

"I don't see what you got that the dames go for," Leo would mutter in amazement. Damned if I can figure how a one-eyed little rat like you can have all the luck."

I just gave him a superior grin and let it go at that. If he thought I went to bed with the dames, well, let him.

After I got the young couple settled down for the night, I put out the "No Vacancy" sign and locked up for the night. I went to cabin 13, unlocked the door and went in. I didn't have to turn on the light, because there was enough of it filtering through the two-way mirrors to light up the room. I peeped through at the teen-agers. They were lying across the bed doing some heavy petting, but nothing to get excited about yet. It was different with the red-head.

The mirror was facing her bed, and she was undressing for the night. I started snapping pictures; when she was completely nude, it was a sight that made my one eye want to crawl out of its socket. Man, she was a cool number. She snapped out the light and went to bed, and I stood there with the sweat rolling off of me. A body like that really gets a feller worked up. I knew I had some good pictures that would make Leo's tongue hang out.

I turned my attention to the young punk and his girl friend, and I wasn't disappointed with the night's work.

Next morning, I rang Leo. I told him I had some new stuff for him, and he said he'd be right over. He sounded crabby on the phone, so I knew he was having trouble with his wife again. Oh, well. It was no skin off my teeth.

Leo was mad as hell when he arrived but when I showed him a few stills of the teen-agers, he calmed down.

"How about getting me in on some of your parties?" he said as he studied them.

"Nothing doing, Leo. I keep all of the women who pose for me to myself."

"Can't blame you." he grunted.

"How do you like these?" I asked, handing him a fistful of pictures of the red head. I watched his face. His eyes got big, and his mouth was open.

"Ain't she a honey? I had a little trouble talking her into posing for me, but—" I didn't get a chance to finish. Suddenly Leo got to his feet, his face a mask of sheer hate.

"You dirty little louse!" he snapped, and started moving towards me.

"Leo! What's wrong?" I screamed. "What's got into you?"

"That's my wife! So you're the one she's been messing around with, huh?"

"No! No, now listen, Leo—"

"She even posed for you!" he

snarled, and I saw his hand slip into his pocket, and a second later the switchblade opened with a small click.

"Wait a minute, Leo! For God's sake, let me explain! Don't kill me, Leo!"

He laughed. He had me in the corner now, my back against the wall.

"I won't kill you. No, I'm not going to kill you. But you'll never look at my wife again. You won't look at nobody, because I'm going to pluck out that *other* eye!"

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It started like anything else, just some of us playing poker, with Hansen running up saying, "You guys hear the news? Chief Foley's kid said some guy tried to break into the women's locker room at the swimming pool last night while she was changing her clothes."

Benoit said, "Jesus!" McCloy looked sick. Danner's eyes widened with everything quiet, very quiet, the barracks suddenly very dirty.

Benoit, wiping his hands across his shirt, said, "What happened, man? What happened?"

Hansen came back at him excitedly, "There's not much to it. Last night the kid said she saw a man's face in the window peeking at her while she was changing. It went away and then she heard the door being banged, you know, the guy trying to smash the lock and get in at her. But the guy stopped and the kid says she thinks he heard some one coming and beat it."

"Jesus!" Benoit said. "Jesus, what filthy characters up here."

"That girl's only about twelve," I said.

"How about that," Hansen said. "Trying to break in at a kid that age. That guy's a pervert, whoever he is."

"They shouldn't bring their families to this lousy base," McCloy said angrily. "There aren't any single women up here. These married guys bring their wives and kids. Then they parade them around guys who haven't been near a girl in a year. It serves them right."

Benoit clenched his fists. "I'd like to get that bastard. I'd squash his head in."

Danner nodded. A vein on his forehead swelled and his pimply skin glowed.

"Did they find out who it was?" I asked Hansen.

"Nah. All the kid saw was the face in the window."

"It was bound to happen," McCloy said. "And it'll keep hap-

BY

FRITZ DUGAN

It doesn't do any good to talk or watch, believe me. You've got to keep fighting for . . .

pening and getting worse until somebody gets hurt. Then they'll give the guy twenty years because he couldn't forget about women."

"That's probably just what will happen," I said.

Playing cards, we talked it out. McCloy angry, but sympathetic for the guy who did it, Benoit looking mean and bullheaded, and Hansen, who was just a kid, excited. Danner was greedy, sitting by the fire exit door listening to whoever was talking with eyes like a hungry cat.

Benoit had lost a lot of money and was grumbling to himself. He was a big man with heavily-muscled arms and huge bony fists. He slammed his cards onto the table and shook his head back and forth, his eyes taking in Danner's face by the door, his head profiled against the lighted backdrop of the married men's quarters across the road from our barracks.

"What do you see over there, Danner?" he taunted. "What's to see in the windows that makes you slobber and pick at your face?"

Danner, his face coloring, a hand raising nervously and fingering a blemish, mumbled, "Nothing. I'm doing nothing wrong."

"You mean nothing? You call that peeking at the wives nothing?"

"Lay off him, Benoit," I said.

"With that face he bothers everybody," Benoit snarled. "That's the kind of guy that sneaks around trying to get at kids."

I stood up and went over by the door. I looked out into the darkness and across at the lighted windows in the apartments of the married men. "We all look over there once in a while," I said.

Benoit reached over and pulled a book from Danner's hand. He looked at it for a moment, then tossed it to me. "Look at this title. Only a pervert would read a book like 'The Secrets of European Love.'"

Benoit was breathing hard. He rapped his big hands on the table, glaring at Danner.

"You pure little thing," I said. "You lose at cards so you take it out on Danner."

Benoit stood up, jabbed a finger in Danner's chest, and said, "Why are you protecting this punk?"

"That's easy. Next time it might be me."

"You guys are buddy-buddy, eh? Maybe you peek togeth . . ."

I hit him in the throat, shoving him back, gasping, his arms flailing out. I moved in, hitting him again in the throat, then in the face, the face, the face, until he went down on his knees, choking, clutching at his throat. I rabbit-punched the back of his neck, hearing his face whack into the floor, and then he was quiet.

McCloy and Hansen pulled me away.

"He was only blowing off steam," McCloy said. "You didn't have to hit him so hard."

I did not say anything. I wanted Benoit to get up and come back at me. I had seen his kind in bars beating up weaklings and not knowing why they did it. But I knew; it was fear. Still, I wanted him to come back at me.

McCloy took him into the head to wash up. We went back to poker until the game broke up at ten at lights-out.

It was a nice night. I went outside and sat on a rock and looked at the sea.

What had happened earlier was inevitable. The base was no place for a single man to pull a two year tour of shore duty. The only women up there were the wives and daughters of the married men and they were told to keep away from us. It was hard to forget about women. When we played poker in the barracks we always kept the fire exit door open and looked out across the road at the buildings where the Brownbaggers and their families lived.

Charley Danner never played poker but he always sat by the open door. Sometimes late at night I would see him by the door staring at the yellow lights coming from the windows and doorways across the road.

Danner was a quiet man, only sensitive about his face. Tall and lean, his face was an ugly rainbow of red and purple blemishes. At night, standing under a steaming shower, Danner scrubbed his face in the hot water until it steamed red and puffed up like a swollen wet balloon. Then, standing before a mirror, his hands would shake and his eyes would fill with rage at his inflamed face which he was enable to control. Danner was thirty-one but still had the skin trouble of a sixteen-year-old.

I spoke to him about his face once but he blushed and stammered and wouldn't talk to me. Whenever there was a woman near him he put a handkerchief to his face or turned his head sideways or walked away. I never saw him with a woman.

But he had his women, big-breasted and full-lipped, pasted on his locker wall. He had a collection of what are called "french postcards" and a deck of oversized playing cards illustrated by photographs of nudes, some single, some in group pictures, all posing nakedly, smiling sensuously and lewdly. These were the women of Charley Danner. Many times I would see him seated on his bunk playing solitaire with his cards, his eyes bright and his fingers shaking as he held the cards, lost somewhere in the pornographic dreams. I can never look at those things. They leave me cold. It has to be the real thing or nothing.

When I went back into the barracks I saw a shadow by the fire exit. I went over to the door. It was Danner.

"Thanks for tonight," he said.

"Forget it."

I stared at his darkened face.

"They think I'm the guy who did it," he said. "Just because I was reading that book they think I'd attack a little kid."

I did not say anything. I stared at the dark profile of his face. There was something about it. He was older than me but we were both about the same height and weight. In the shadows, the profile and bone structure of his face looked like mine, except for the blotchy skin on his face that he rubbed and squeezed and scalded with water.

"Look," I said. "I don't know you very well but I know your trouble. You're too self-conscious about your face."

In the darkness I could see him wince. He started to get up to go. I put my hand on his shoulder, restraining him.

"That's what started Benoit tonight," I said. "Your face. If you hadn't turned so red when he talked about picking your face, he wouldn't have got on you like he did. It's your weakness."

"What do you know about it?" he said angrily. "What do you know about the misery I've had with my face?"

"Nobody cares about your face."

"I care. I care. I care about it and I can't beat it. You think I don't see the disgusted look people give me? You think that's nothing?"

"They don't. Those looks are all in your mind. Only the bullies like Benoit say anything about it."

He sat there, not saying anything.

"You have to overcome it," I said. "Develop personality. You know, like being funny or playing the piano."

"My brother says I *do* write amusing letters."

We laughed together. I could feel Charley Danner creeping out of his shell. I told him of a girl who worked in the snack bar, the daughter of one of the married men, who wasn't too bad a girl.

"Don't ask her for a date," I said. "She goes out with Ensign Kass. But kid around with her, you know, nice like. It'll give you confidence."

Her name was Peggy Neilsen. Charley said he knew her by sight. He said he saw her coming up the road every night when she was through work. She lived in the second row of apartments across the road, Charley told me, and every Friday night she took a late swim at the pool. I laughed at that. I thought he did not even know her, but from that seat of his by the fire exit I guess he saw everybody on the base when they were coming or going.

My plane crew had a long flight the next day and I did not see Danner again until Thursday night. I asked him about Peggy Neilsen.

"She laughed," he said.

"Good deal. You're making progress."

His face turned very red. "You don't get it. She laughed at me. She took one look at my face and laughed at me. She wouldn't even talk to me."

I felt that I had let him down. I always figured Peggy Neilsen as one of the few nice girls on the base. "What happened?" I asked.

He rubbed his face viciously with a towel. "Nothing happened," he said. "I went in there yesterday and tried to talk to her. She laughed. She took one look at my face and walked away laughing."

He slumped back against the wall, wringing the towel in his hands. Tiny shivers shook through his body and water welled up in his eyes. He put his fingers to his face and looked into a mirror.

I tried to talk to him, but he pulled away from me. He left the head and went over to his locker. He took out his collection of pornographic cards. He went to his bunk and laid the pictures on his blanket. He sat on his bunk, breathing hard, his eyes bright and fixed on the pictures, his hands trembling excitedly. He had retreated to the false fires of his lurid cards.

I let him alone. It was not real, what he did. It's no good unless it is the real thing.

The next night was Friday. As usual, we played cards with the fire door open. Danner did not sit by the door. He sat on his bunk, playing with his collection of cards until lights out.

It was another nice night. I went out by myself again into the night.

The next morning the news was all over the base. Four or five people told me about it on the way to the chow hall. The corridors buzzed with it. Peggy Neilsen had been raped.

In the chow hall I looked around for Danner but he wasn't there. I sat down at a table with Hansen and McCloy. Hansen knew most of the story. The girl had come out of the swimming pool about ten-thirty the night before and walked along the road toward her house. Somebody had reached out and slugged her, then dragged her behind the gymnasium and raped her.

"You'll never guess the clincher," Hansen said.

"What?" asked McCloy.

"She knows who did it."

My heart burned hotly; it felt heavy, like it was missing beats. My hands were cold and sweaty. I stood up and looked around the chow hall. Charley Danner was not at breakfast.

I asked Hansen who did it.

"She doesn't know his name," he said, "but she told the duty officer and Ensign Kass that she'd recognize the guy if she saw him again. She says that even in the dark she got an idea of what he looked like."

"What are they going to do?" McCloy asked.

"I know," I said. "I saw this happen once in Alaska. They'll put the girl by the chow hall door and let her see everybody who goes past. When she sees the one who did it, she'll signal the duty officer, and that'll be it."

Hansen grinned. "Right. They're posting orders now that everybody has to eat here this afternoon and get their names checked off."

I left the chow hall without finishing eating.

I found Danner in his bunk. He knew. I spoke quietly, "Did you get out of bed last night?"

"No," he said. His face was pale and fear choked his voice. "I didn't do it. Honest! I didn't get out of bed all night."

"You'll have to go eat this afternoon."

His eyes widened. "No," he said. "No. If I go, they'll say I did it. Just like Benoit said I did the peeking."

"You have to go," I said. "They're checking everybody's name. They'll come after you."

He fell back on his bunk. "I can't go. They'll think . . . I can't. I'm afraid."

I thought of how easily he colored under abuse. I talked for a long time. He had to go. He had to be seen by Peggy Neilsen. Gradually, he relaxed. "Go early," I said. "Then you'll be through. If you go late, they might think you were scared and tried to stay away."

"How early?" he asked.

"Go at eleven—as soon as it opens. Get in past her quick before she gets set."

"Okay," he said.

I went over to the hanger and borrowed a typewriter. I wrote some letters, mailed them, made a telephone call, and about 12:30 I left for the chow hall.

The girl and the duty officer were not there. A mess cook was wiping up red stains on the floor. I turned and ran back to the barracks, my hear a tight ball of fear.

Danner's locker was cut open. The sleeves had been upset and papers were strewn on the floor. His pin-ups were gone. There was a heavy silence in the barracks. Hansen saw me.

"It was Danner all right," he said. "Ensign Kass came in here while he was at chow and cut open his locker. He brought all those dirty pictures down to the chow hall."

"But that's not proof," I said. "Those pictures can't be proof."

"They was part, man. Danner got past the girl, but then Ensign Kass got a phone call. He came charging down here and got all those dirty cards and pictures out of the locker. They got Danner in the chow hall. They asked him about the pictures and when he didn't speak up Ensign Kass told him to quit picking his face and answer the questions. The girl came over and Danner got red as a beet. Just by seeing how red he got, you could

tell he was the guy. Ensign Kass hauled off and clobbered him. The girl started screaming that he was the guy and she tried to scratch him. They they all started working him over in the chow hall right there, the duty officer and all. Old Benoit got in a few licks before they scooped Danner off the floor. They took him to the brig."

"He didn't do it," I said.

"He was your buddy. You never believe your buddy can do those things."

"Danner wouldn't have the guts to do it."

"Don't take it too bad," Hansen said. "It's only his first offense. They won't give him more than twenty years."

"At least he won't have to worry about his face any more."

"What?"

"Nothing, Hansen. Nothing."

They gave Charley Danner a General Court Martial. I did not go to the trial. Peggy Neilsen swore Danner was the man who attacked her that night. The Foley girl said that it was his face she saw in the window. Throughout the trial Danner wept and pounded on tables and screamed his innocence. It took just twenty minutes for the verdict. Danner got a Dishonorable Discharge and was sentenced to fourteen years in the Naval Prison.

After the trial McCloy and Hansen took me over to the beer hall. To humor me they said they thought Danner was innocent.

Two months later I was discharged.

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